

A photograph of a person sitting on a rocky cliff edge, looking down at a vast, layered landscape. The person is wearing white shorts and blue jeans, with their back to the viewer. The landscape below is a mix of green and brown, with distinct horizontal layers of rock or soil. The sky is clear and blue.

Heaven & Hell

Miriam Stanke

Heaven & Hell

Photographs by Miriam Stanke

from Dersim in Eastern Anatolia (2014)
and from Sinjar in North Iraq (2021)











SINJAR MY SOUL



I know a child who paints with cruelty
For example,
yesterday he drew the map of Iraq
On the map, Shingal mountain
On the mountain, trees
On the trees, he painted birds
without wings
He told me: I don't want them to fly to
strange countries

Sarmad Saleem











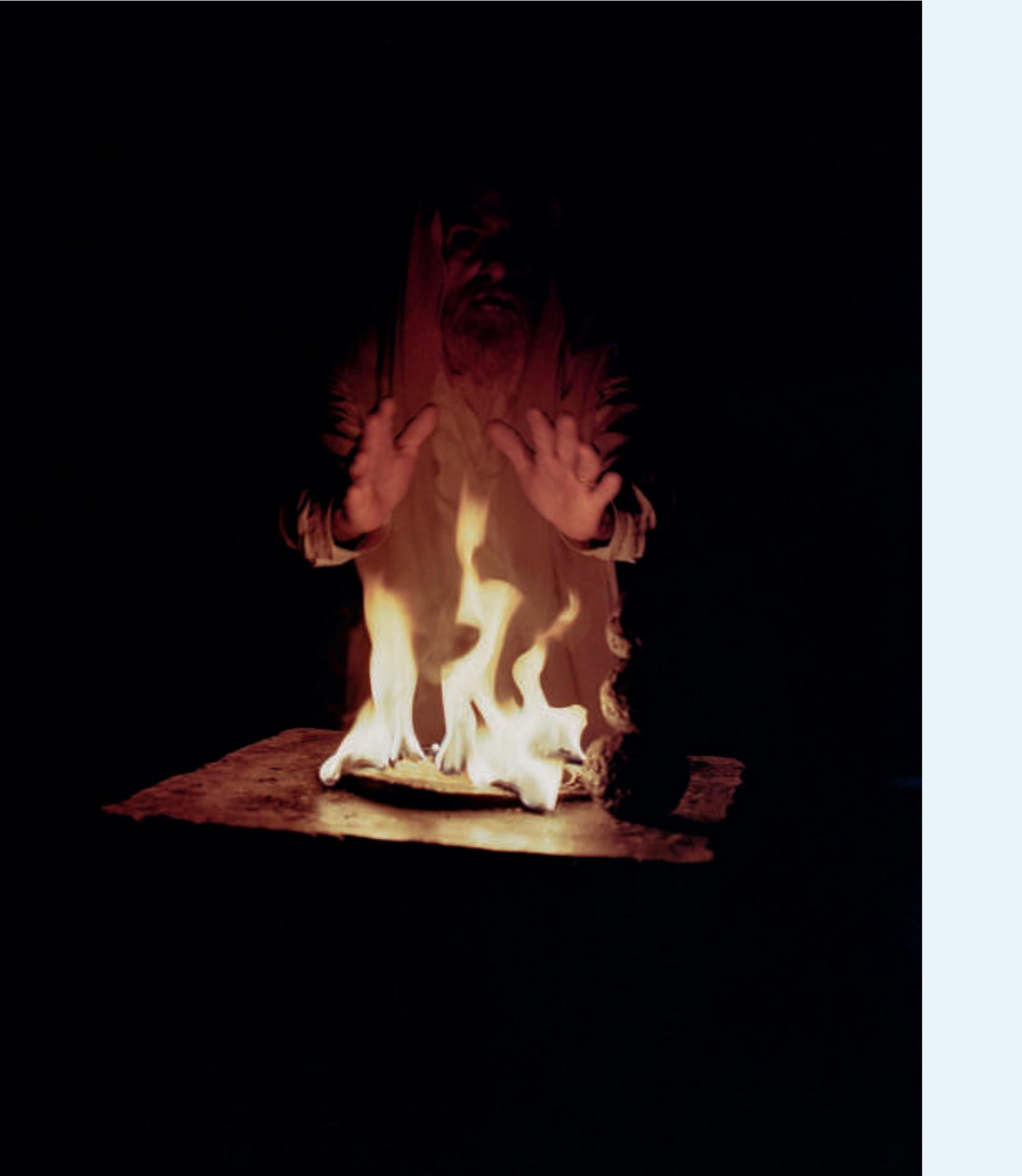


RIVER OF MY TEARS

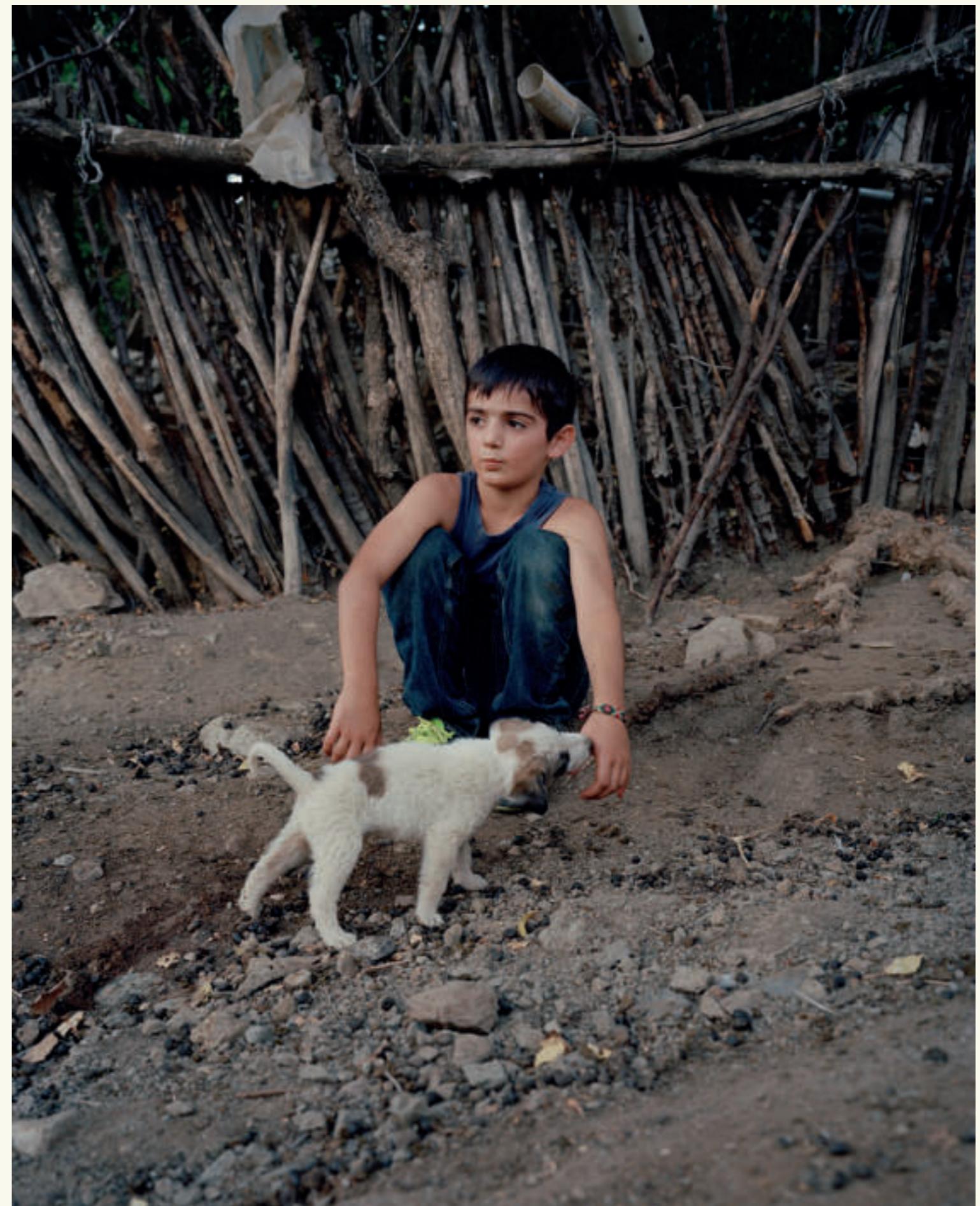


"It's pointless to worship material things, because one day you'll be dead and nothing that you own will matter any more. So the best thing is to be kind and just and generous to other people, because if in this world you are helpful and loving, then you are already living in Heaven. But if you are greedy and mean and dishonest, then you are living in Hell, here and now."

Hayri Dede, Alevi religious leader













SINJAR MY SOUL



The child who walked on the road
from the mountain to Rojava
With a shoe larger than his size
He only knows the name of the soldiers
who left their shoes
In Shingal

Sarmad Saleem













RIVER OF MY TEARS



"Nature is holy," is a refrain commonly spoken around the valley, and everything in it is believed to have a soul, from animals and plants, to rocks, dirt, and especially water.

Michael Benanav













SINJAR MY SOUL



I want to turn my heart into a big eraser
I want it to leave a hole in my chest
The shelling which will fall on Shingal
After fajr prayers
I want to stretch my hand out easily
And erase hate from the world

Sarmad Saleem











RIVER OF MY TEARS



The Dersim Massacre and the Evacuation of 1994 have undoubtedly contributed to the exceptional degree of political awareness and activism that permeates this isolated, marginalized region.

Michael Benanav















SINJAR MY SOUL



He danced a lot
Before he went to war
He knew he would return with one leg

Sarmad Saleem







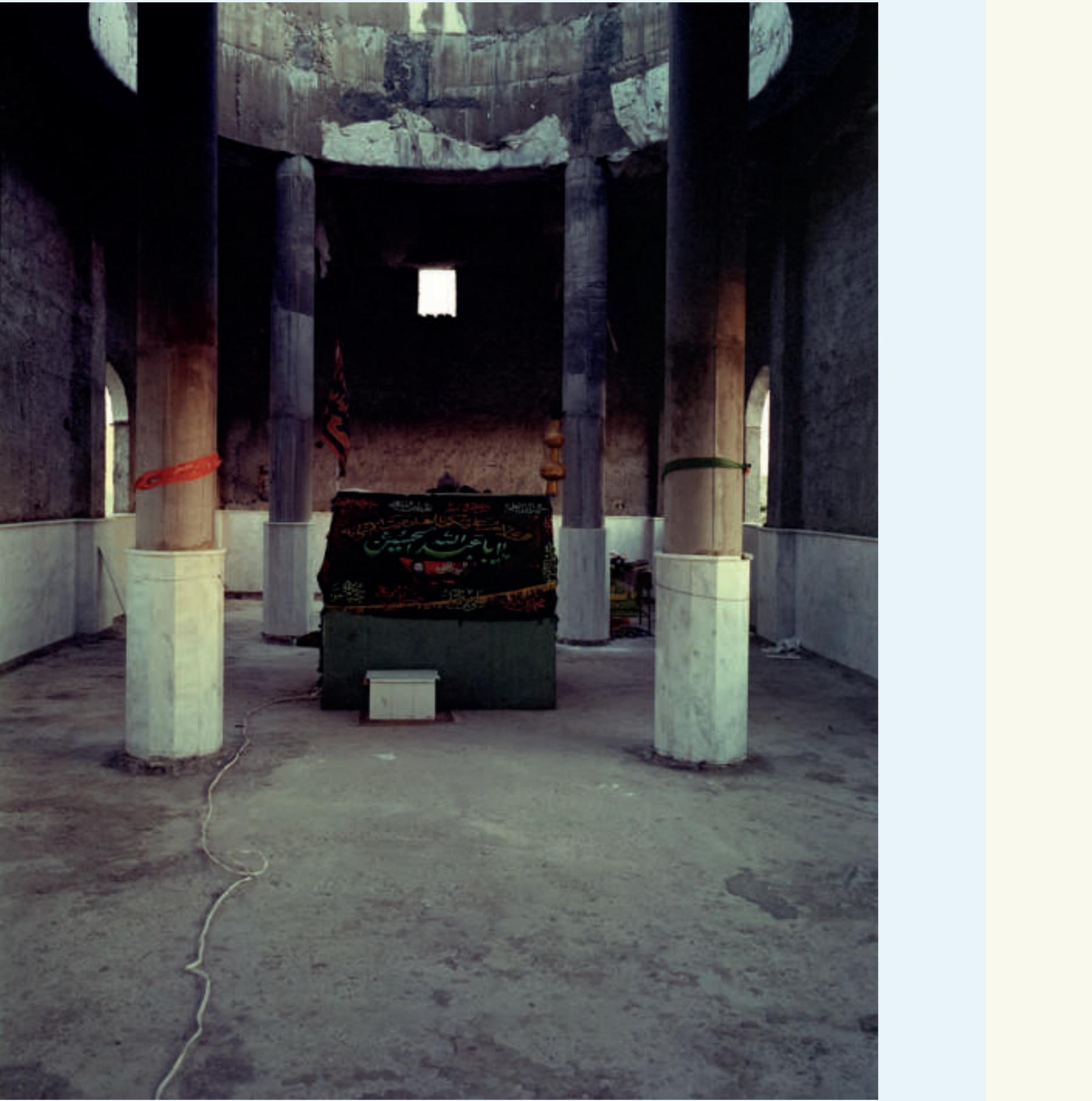


RIVER OF MY TEARS



The face of the earth became redder then the sunset.
What flows there is blood, in streams it flows, it comes
from babies, from elders.
The mountains' cry surpasses the thunder in might.
What hits bellies and faces are bullets.
What flows there is blood, the hitting bullets.
O oppressed people, orphaned motherland.
White bearded elders, passed-away souls.
For days the cruel wind licked the wounded.
The old men for the young, the young for the old women.
The sky cried, full of stars.
What flows there is blood, don't forget Dersim, comrade
and when blood flows a thousand times more, defend
your fragile motherland.
Damn slavery! Long live freedom!

N. Behr, 1977















SINJAR MY SOUL



For Shingal, which is afraid of darkness
March sun,
Prayers of my father,
And Sherfadeen.
For Shingal, that hungry country
My mother's bread,
And the bosom of my love.
For that thirsty land
God opens his button eyes
And cries profusely

Sarmad Saleem











Sinjar My Soul, To You I Belong

Miriam Stanke, 2021

The area around the Zhengal Mountains is home to countless êzîdic families and sacred places. The existence of the êzîdic community rooted in northern Iraq suddenly came to the world's attention in August 2014, when the so-called Islamic State launched a genocide against the Kurdish-speaking ethno-religious minority. The collective trauma runs through their history of persecution, displacement and attempted assimilation.

The Shingal region, also known as Sinjar, is a desert-like area centered on a majestic mountain range that sheltered the religious mixture for centuries. The many shrines built there give an idea of the religious significance of this highland in the êzîd culture.

Stories of flight and resistance are told at the sacred shrines. The êzîd culture is still strongly influenced by oral traditions and lore. Stories about what happened and the miraculous help of the saints also serve to process trauma. The photographic project provides insights into a religion that is based on oral tradition and represents a valuable cultural heritage. In addition to the political power struggle to which the region is exposed in a country still heavily scarred by war, the project addresses the struggle for recognition and tells of a trauma that can only be processed collectively.

Das Gebiet um das Schengal-Gebirge ist Heimat unzähliger êzîdischer Familien und heiliger Orte. Die Existenz der im Nordirak verwurzelten êzîdischen Gemeinschaft kam der Welt im August 2014 plötzlich zu Bewusstsein, als der sogenannte Islamische Staat einen Genozid gegen die kurdisch-sprachige ethno-religiöse Minderheit begann. Das kollektive Trauma zieht sich durch ihre Geschichte, die von Verfolgung, Vertreibung und Assimilationsversuchen geprägt ist.

Die Region Shingal, auch Sinjar genannt, ist ein wüstenähnliches Gebiet, deren Mittelpunkt ein majestatisches Gebirge bilde, das der religiösen gemästet über Jahrhunderte Schutz bat. Die vielen dort erbauten Schreine lassen die religiöse Bedeutung dieses Hochlands in der êzîdischen Kultur erahnen.

Geschichten von Flucht und Widerstand werden an den heiligen Schreinen erzählt. Die êzîdische Kultur ist bis heute stark durch mündliche Traditionen und Überlieferungen geprägt. Erzählungen über das Geschehene und die wundersame Hilfe der Heiligen dienen auch zur Verarbeitung des Traumas. Das fotografische Projekt gibt Einblicke in eine Religion, die auf mündlicher Überlieferung beruht und ein wertvolles kulturelles Erbe darstellt. Neben dem politischen Machtkampf, dem die Region in einem immer noch stark vom Krieg gezeichneten Land ausgesetzt ist, themisiert das Projekt den Kampf um Anerkennung und erzählt von einem Trauma, das nur kollektiv verarbeitet werden kann.

And the Mountain said to Munzur: You, River of my Tears

Miriam Stanke, 2014

River of my Tears tells the story of Dersim, a remote mountainous region of eastern Anatolia centered on the Munzur River and the mountain range of the same name. Dersim is the historical heartland of the Kurdish Alevis, a heterodox religious group that has always been subjected to oppression and persecution by the Turkish state and that continues to fight for recognition and its heritage to this day. Recurrent struggles reached their sad climax in 1938 with a genocide that claimed tens of thousands of victims.

In the second half of the 20th century, Dersim became a melting pot for left-leaning political dissidents, as well as an important center for some communist movements. Munzur's mountains have served as a hideout for guerrilla groups ever since, and even today this region is one of those with the highest military presence in the country.

The project shows insights into a society whose cultural and religious history in its particular diversity and isolation can be found not only in special rites, prayers or social structures, but also in a clear political stance for autonomy and equality of different social groups; and in the desire for recognition of their own identity. In this context, Dersim also symbolically stands for resistance and the struggle against oppression.

River of my Tears erzählt von Dersim, einer entlegenen Bergregion Ostanatoliens, deren Zentrum der Munzur Fluss und das gleichnamige Gebirge bilden. Dersim ist das historische Kernland der kurdischen Aleviten, einer heterodoxen religiösen Gruppe, die seit jeher Unterdrückung und Verfolgung durch den türkischen Staat ausgesetzt ist und die bis heute um Anerkennung und ihr Erbe kämpft. Immer wiederkehrende Kämpfe fanden ihren traurigen Höhepunkt 1938 in einem Genozid, dem Zehntausende zum Opfer fielen.

In der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts wurde Dersim zu einem Schmelztiegel für politisch linksgerichtete Dissidenten, sowie ein wichtiges Zentrum für einige kommunistische Bewegungen. Munzurs Berge dienten seitdem als Versteck für Guerillagruppen und noch heute ist diese Region eine derjenigen mit der höchsten Militärpräsenz des Landes.

Das Projekt zeigt Einblicke in eine Gesellschaft, deren kulturelle und religiöse Geschichte in ihrer besonderen Vielfalt und Isolation nicht nur in speziellen Riten, Gebeten oder Gesellschaftsstrukturen zu finden ist, sondern auch in einer klaren politischen Haltung für Autonomie und Gleichberechtigung verschiedener sozialer Gruppen; und in dem Wunsch nach Anerkennung ihrer eigenen Identität. Dabei steht Dersim symbolisch auch für Widerstand und den Kampf gegen Unterdrückung.

RIVER OF MY TEARS

SINJAR MY SOUL

