

Exercise 6

The Portrait

A Picture *About*,
Not *Of*, Someone

Whenever it happened I'd know...the heart, there in the face. It was as though I'd leaned in to whisper something and found I suddenly couldn't speak. There I'd be, drowning in their face while they looked back into a circle of dark glass. It felt like kissing, beautiful and frightening, both at once.



A portrait is not a headshot. It is an encounter, a wordless experience of another person that is made into an image.

I approach making a photograph of person with both fear and exhilaration. I've learned that when those two states collide something powerful can happen, something that takes me beyond control. I've traveled to Mexico, Cuba, Cairo and Africa just to abandon myself to people, to gaze into the human face. It is an endless, bottomless project.

And it is your next assignment.

Notice I am circling around the word "portrait" here. I think it evokes a head-and-shoulders right-hand-over-left kind of photo that ames to please. I want to get at something much fuller in my own work and in this exercise.

I also want us to work consciously with some of the things we explored in previous exercises—composition as a narrative device, light as energy, space as a ground on which poetry is inscribed. We can also draw on the kind of psychological insight we used when we looked at strangers and wrote their biography.

But this time there is a hugely important addition to the brief: to make this exercise work, you have to see the person in front of you *and you have to let them see you too*.

That means that you simply have to be as present for them as you want them to be for you.

If this seems like a lot to keep track of, don't try. Set your thoughts aside and just begin. That's always a good way past obstacles. Go at the task with the same kind of thoughtless awareness that you had when you taped down your focus. Just move and shoot, and keep doing it.

We are after a picture that leaves a person's wholeness and complexity intact *even if it seems contradictory*, one that gives a viewer a heightened and intensified sense of the person than he or she might get from them in person.

Why do portraits at all?

There are all kinds of reasons that the portrait has always been one of the great themes of art and particularly of photography. One is that humans are

Approach each portrait as though you had never done one before.

always fascinated by themselves. In his book, *Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* Matthew D. Lieberman says that for almost all human beings the activity that almost every brain defaults to when not overtly engaged in some other activity is thinking about other people and our relationship to them.

I'm sure this is true of other animals too. Go to a dog run some time and watch. Then go from there right to a cocktail party or a gallery opening and see what's going on. It will seem like a dog run where the dogs are drinking.

Now a few concrete considerations:

1. Who will you photograph?
2. Where will you photograph them?
3. What about the light?

First, should you photograph someone you know or should it be a stranger? I say, do the stranger.

How we view ourselves... or would like to.

Nancy Etcoff, an assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and director of the Program in Aesthetics and Well Being at Massachusetts General Hospital, has studied how beauty affects the brain. Recent studies indicate that most people view themselves as "slightly more attractive" than the average photograph of themselves, she said.

"If you take a photograph of a person and you morph it with a more attractive person, and you morph it with a less attractive person, and show them the original, they are more likely to pick out, as themselves, their face morphed with the more attractive person"

New York Times, April 15, 2011

It may seem more viable to ask someone you know—easier at least. Don't do it. Friends will, after a short protest, say yes, but the thing is that they will want to look better than they really do...as do we all. And you will want to do that for them. But when you do, you will tend to cover up the texture and contradictions, you'll resolve and smooth over the very stuff that makes them interesting. Of course that stuff will show anyway, and your friend might be disillusioned with themselves and annoyed with you. Though it sounds odd put this way, most of us would rather be illusioned.

If you're in the portrait business, softening reality is acceptable, but if you're after the stuff of art, the full-spectrum evocation of another human being, you are really after an unexpurgated view. It can even be loving, but if you prettify everything, the result is just not interesting.

For example, the photograph of the confined prisoner in the portfolio that follows would

undoubtedly not please his mother, but it really represents the man and gives a sense of where he is, with hints in his attitude of why he might be there. I didn't try to relax him, I just jumped into doing it, and it is one of the strongest portraits I've ever done.

All of this is why I suggest that you approach and work with someone you don't know at all, someone you don't need to protect. You'll avoid doing bland work and of risking the wrath of a friend. The time you spend with them will be an exploration. You will see more and take nothing for granted. The intensity will put you in a state of much greater alertness, and your subject too. I'm not saying be cruel, just an honest witness.

Whomever you photograph, you will likely find that doing it makes for some tension. Good! Leave it there. It brings both you and your sitter to a kind of alertness. Don't dissipate it, use it.

Then there is the question of where to work.

This is important: never, ever simply photograph a person where they are when they said, *Yes*. Look around, in advance if possible, and find a "good"

place, i.e., one that has graphic possibilities, some nice light and perhaps some clues about your subject. That might mean a room, it might mean outdoors, it might mean a circus tent or a theater dressing room or any place at all, but you have to choose a place deliberately and then you have to ask your subject to go there.

(As with the prisoner, it can be just where they are already, but you still have to make that choice and see how you can use the place.)

There could be some element in the frame that is associated with the person, such as the great black hulk of the piano in Arnold Newman's photo of Stravinsky. But don't rely on the shorthand of props or place to do your work. Everything in the frame—including the energy—has to be actively playing a part...most of all the person you're photographing.

Intruding

People are often reluctant to ask a subject to move or change their shirt or take off their glasses or almost anything at all. They feel they are intruding...and indeed they are. When you ask to photograph someone you are moving into their life

with their permission. When they say yes, that's already been granted. Now you are responsible for the whole outcome and all its elements. And that may mean moving the person into some good light, or away from a distracting background.

Look, if you go the dentist he'll ask you to lie in the chair, and open your mouth. You don't resent it. This is what he needs to do his work. People actually appreciate being managed when someone is making their portrait.

Light

Light is a main player in any photograph. We did some exercises that were entirely about light, and from that you can understand that you may need to manage someone into a light that will do what you want. (And, as with the question of place, you may not necessarily have to move. The quality of the light on someone may be a part of what draws you.

Richard Avedon once said: "A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. And none of them are the truth."

Avedon once told Truman Capote: "Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me."

From "Stilled By Life," Jim Hughes' 1996 piece on Richard Avedon in Photo Techniques magazine.

The prisoner, again, is an example. There was a window opposite the man that threw a cross light on his face. Perfect as it was)

I'm not talking about lighting here, I'm talking about light. That means seeing light, as opposed to making it happen. If is not there, find it. I suggest you begin by looking near a window.

None of this means that you shouldn't move a light or set up a strobe. But the best lighting comes from an understanding of how light works in the wild, so to

speaking, its complexity and interest, how wonderful imperfect light can be. You want to use the, not perfect it.

And that's all I'll say about light at this point, except to say that in the portfolio that follows, most of the light is natural...though it is often managed with reflectors, blockers, etc. These questions of subject, place, and light are secondary to that larger

question we raised earlier: why do we make photographs of people at all?

Well, because we are endlessly fascinated by our own kind, as we saw earlier. But I also think it is because doing a portrait gives us a God-like power to create a being. Seriously. My picture of someone is my version of them, one that the subject and I create together.

Being with another person and making a portrait is intense, and should be. It is not necessarily comfortable to be in a state of direct human connection. If you want an unguarded look into someone, you have to understand that they will look into you too. This doesn't necessarily mean gazing into each other's eyes or having a long talk before you photograph. It can happen in an instant.

We don't run all this through our minds when we photograph someone, but I think we do enter a complex resonance with them, a sense of some harmony we want to grasp...or some disharmony.

No writer ever writes about someone who is perfect. Writers want life, in full, not a version with the live removed. Same with the photographic por-

trait. The contradictions hint at the full complexity in someone that draws us. It offers the photographer the chance to take the person in and make a version that expresses both the attractions and the contradictions that they probably wouldn't express directly to them. It can be done in a sixtieth of a second, but it suggests a kind of fullness before and after that moment.

So we've looked at some of the considerations that let you make an image of a whole person. To sum up, when you go at it:

1. Find someone who is interesting to you, that you want to know more about.
2. Commit to seeing into them deeply, as deeply as you can, just as they are. You can heighten what you see, but don't alter it.
3. Take charge of setting and light, clothing, props.
4. To these I'd add one more: don't be polite, be honest.

The Big Secret

Once you have settled all this, take responsibility and let go, both. *Allow* photographs to emerge, to go beyond your ideas. Afterward, going through what you've done, we may come across a picture that just stuns us. That's the one we were after all along.

Looking at your portraits

Time for the critique, the dreaded critique, which is no less daunting if you're critiquing yourself. So, a few things to remember:

The purpose is not to nail things down *or* to pull them apart. It is to open them up and see what you've done from many angles, to understand what you saw and what you didn't.

Maybe the best way to do this is to look at your pictures as they were someone else's.

I do this by going through my files quite quickly, the way people do, and ranking anything that catches my eye as a #2. Then I make a further pass to refine my choices, promoting those that seem more complete to a ranking of #3. Then I put the whole take aside for a while, and return later, look-

ing for the ones that leap out. Only then do I work with some files to really refine them (trying not to overdo the refinements). You have the ability to read very subtle clues about a person's state. Use it. This can take time...or should.

Do your pictures look like the person the way you think of them? And does that matter? Not much. If it is simply a record of the topography of someone's face, that's fine for a passport photo, but if your intention was to make a full portrait, what matters is the way that someone who knows nothing about your subject might feel from your picture.

Is an intense picture of a person a portrait?

If you photograph a person cheering at a game, and the person is strongly engaged and the head fills the frame, is that a portrait? I think it is not.

Why not? My view is that a portrait (usually) requires a direct connection with the photographer that goes both ways, a dynamic and mutual revelation. That connection is passed on to the viewer. It can happen quickly, it can happen without speaking, and there doesn't need to be eye contact. There does need to be awareness. You look at them, they

look at you. Its a conversation. That's happens or it doesn't.

The picture at the game? It's a picture of someone getting excited at a game. It's lively, energetic, can even be artful, but its just not a portrait. The need for that connection between you and your subject intensifies things. And intense is what we're after.

Your next portraits.

The best place to start when looking at what you've done is with that question, "Is it alive?" It is *the* thing that a portrait must be. It is possible to learn how to dance the eye around, how to dazzle with light, how to provoke expression, how to make a vigorous experience for the viewer and still use all this to cover up an absence of life and authentic humanity in the sitter. People do it all the time and make successful careers of it. And there is even a place for that in the world. Just look around.

But if you want to work as an artist you have to look for life and allow it to manifest. The life can be inward, the eyes can be closed, they can be looking at you or away, but if the picture is alive, the photographer and subject have engaged and made

something. Look first for life in your portrait. You'll know it when you see it.

Making portraits offers a way to study others and ourselves, and it is a great ongoing practice. I've never heard of anyone doing it just once. You will likely do it again and again, just in the course of your photographic exploration. Each time you'll know more about how the best ones happen.

So whatever you have done during this exercise, go out and do it again. And remember to let every portrait be a conversation.

Now for...Duane Michals. What follows is the introduction he wrote for his book of portraits. Whatever you think about photographing people, this will challenge it.

I AM MUCH NICER THAN MY FACE AND OTHER THOUGHT ABOUT PORTRAITURE

We spend our entire lives looking into mirrors believing the illusions reflected there and comforted by the reality of appearances. Unfortunately, people are seldom what they appear to be, and what is seen is what we expect to see. We look for reassurance not revelation. We do not know.

I knew my mother and father my entire lifetime and not once did they ever reveal themselves to me. To whom have you revealed yourself? Who shares your secrets? What do you know about yourself to tell? Who is reading this now?

For those being photographed, portraiture is essentially about vanity. We want to be told that we are in some way attractive, almost desirable, still young and of value. Anything less is disturbing. We hope for flattery. And all the time we are looking for the wrong thing. We should want clues to our own truth.

High style photographers tend to take the same portrait over and over again. It is essentially the same picture, only the face has been changed to protect the innocent. The photographer should approach

each sitting as if he had never taken a portrait before. He should be surprised by what he has done.

Some photographers can be very presumptuous in their self-delusions about “capturing” another person with their cameras. I know of one who actually believes that he reveals the soul of his sitters with his photographs of them. What you see is what there is. It is also nonsense to reduce people to just their costumes, mere social, racial, and sexual clichés. That is looking at people with the pretensions of looking into them. We never see anyone at all.

My portraits in this book have revealed nothing profound about the subjects or captured anything. They were almost all strangers to me. How could I say anything about them when I never knew them? What I did was to share a moment with them, and

now I share that moment with you, no more, no less.

I always look mean when photographed, and yet I am much nicer than my face. I am not just this chin, this wrinkle, this nose. Do not be deceived by my face.

Bizarre! looking people are very easy to photograph. All the photographer has to do is simply record what they bring to him. The more peculiar looking they are, the easier the job is. We all love to slow down and look at accidents on the freeway.

Celebrities are the easiest of all to photograph. There is no such thing as a bad celebrity portrait. Even a bad picture is a good one. Essentially these portraits tend to be a kind of P.R. photo, puff Mu-zak photography that is a form of celebrity packaging. One must never confuse the profound with the clever.

When someone says, "What a beautiful photograph," upon reviewing a portrait of a handsome man, what they are really saying is, "What a handsome man." Most often it is an ordinary photograph of a beautiful person. If the same photograph were of an ugly person, would it be an ugly photograph?

I prefer to photograph people in their environments. I hate studios. The things that people choose to spend their lives with give us clues to whom they are more than their hairlines.

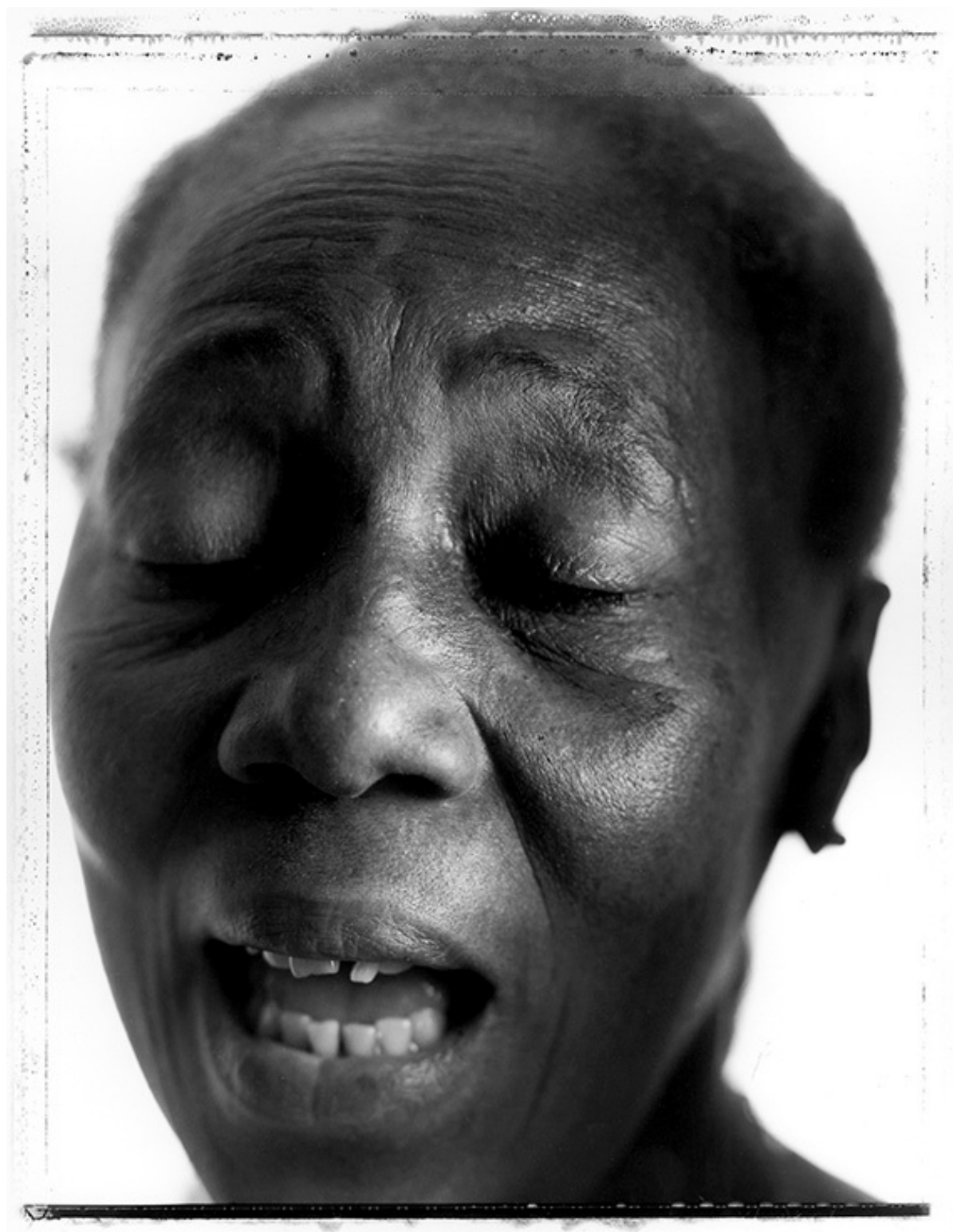
One day when we have forgotten our names, the very proof that we were even here may be those old portraits somewhere in dusty albums.

As I age, while I still have time, I yearn to know how, more than ever, my true self, that random and illusive thing, decorated with personality. We believe ourselves to be this kaleidoscope of passions and distractions. We are a brilliant and unknown moment, suspended between memory and anticipation, anxious in our uncertainties and doomed to face with our consciousness. How can such a mystery be photographed? What is left for us but amazement?

Duane Michals

Here follows a small group of portraits. I am showing mine because I have them to hand. But you should also do an image search for August Sander, Arnold Newman, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Diane Arbus, Nan Golden, and Duane Michals. Also look at the work of the painters Agnolo Brozino, Hermenegildo Bustos, Lucien Freud, Francis Bacon, and on and on.

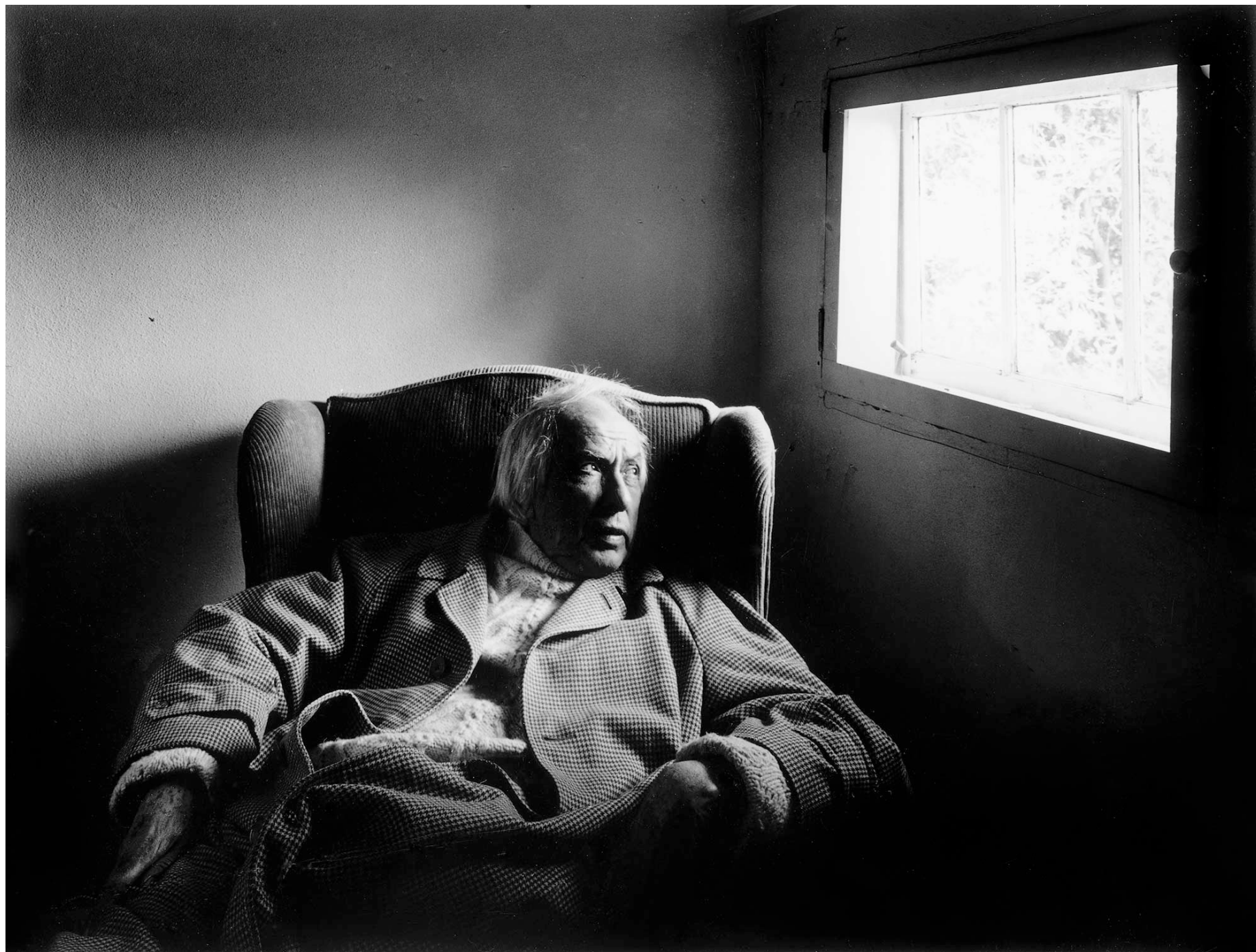












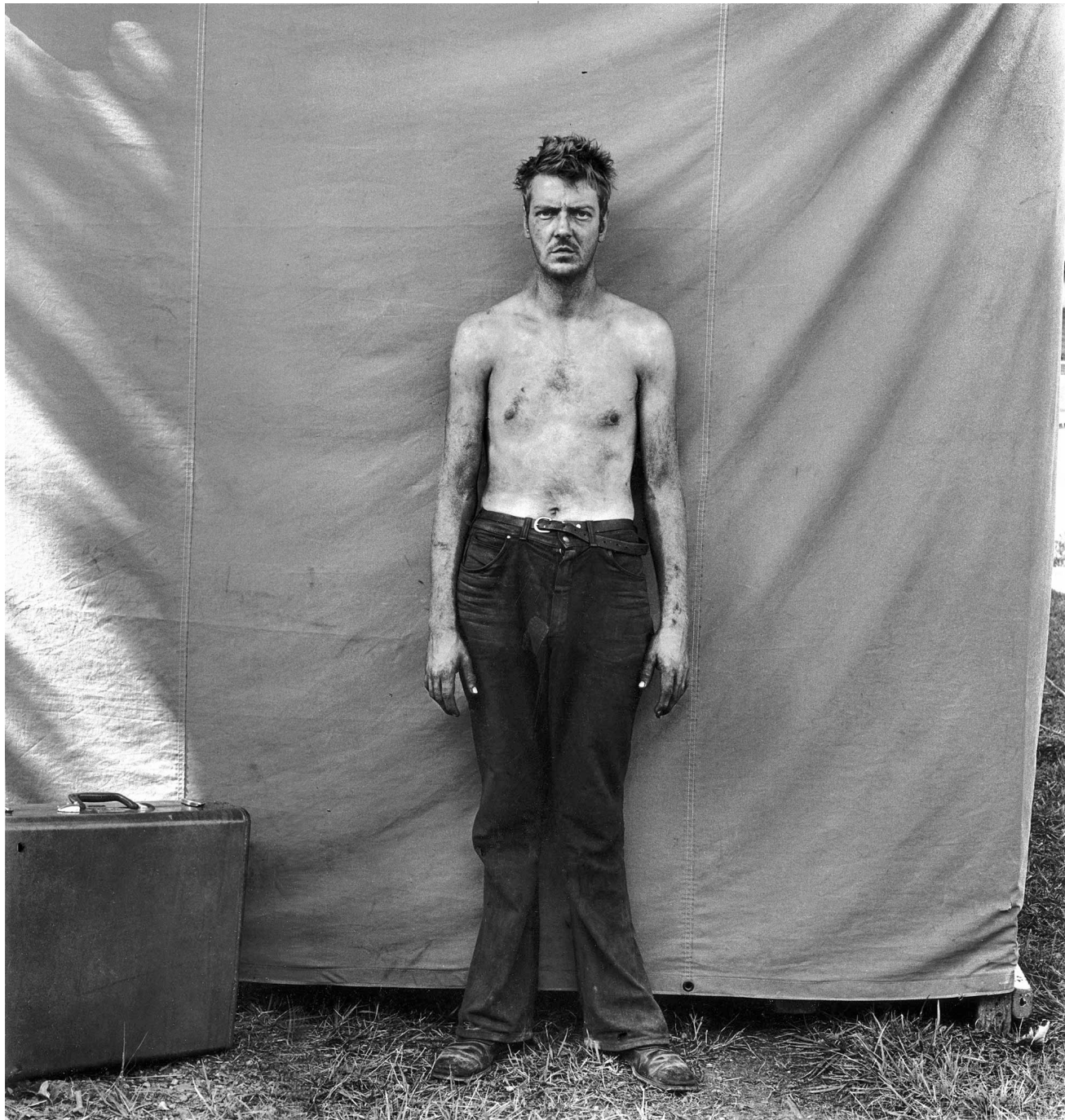














Here is a portrait I
did of my wife
when I first met
her. You can see
very clearly the
story I was seeing,
and that it was
quite true.