

## Newsha Tavakolian's best photograph: woman on a mountainside outside Tehran

Interview by Sian Cain, Thursday 26 November 2015 03.00 EST



‘Somayyeh lived for years in a very conservative town in the country. Then she got divorced and moved to the city. She’s fighting to find a space for herself’

I am never satisfied with my work. Every time I take a picture, I think I could have done better if I had stood in a different spot or had been more patient. This is one of a few that I actually like. People seem drawn to this shot: the natural response when you see Somayyeh is to wonder about her place in the world and why she has chosen a spot among those fierce branches.

I have always been obsessed with childhood photo albums. One day I realised that at the same age, around 13 or 14, the photos end – there is a blank space where

our parents stop dressing us up and taking our photos. I came up with the idea of finishing people’s albums, taking photos of their day-to-day lives to fill in the gap.

A lot of the photo albums in [Iran](#) from 20 or 30 years ago have the same stock landscape shot on the front: a green and flowery mountainside, beautiful and hopeful. I wanted to find my own homage to the stock mountain photograph, so I located this dry, abandoned mountain in Tehran. It’s the polar opposite: desolate, flowerless, almost hopeless.

I chose nine people, people who I thought represented my generation, and took them to the mountain to find the one spot that really called to them. Somayyeh chose this tree.

I’ve known Somayyeh for eight years. She is from a very conservative part of the country, just outside Isfahan. For years, she lived in this town with her family and dreamed of going to Tehran. When she did, the city changed her: she wasn’t able to be invisible in her home town, but in Tehran she found anonymity and she divorced her husband. Somayyeh is fighting every day to find a space for herself in the world – I really admire her.

This was taken on our third trip up the mountain. We were completely alone – it is a remote area, no one was around except for morning hikers and the occasional group of young people. While I work, I do not talk at all; I want my subjects to find peace and feel comfortable.

In other countries it takes time for me to warm up, but in Iran I feel different: my brain, my eyes, my heart are in sync while I am working. My emotions, my *everything* is different when I am there. I’ve worked all over the world, but I thrive in Iran. I took photographs for more than two hours that day in crazy weather: one minute it was raining, the next it was dry. I was so focused on trying to find my shot; eventually I could see Somayyeh was freezing in just her manteau, so we climbed down.

I didn’t notice this image until later, when I was editing. I took it as she was shuffling out, trying to avoid the branches. My first choice had been one where she was stood still, facing the camera. But this shot said much more: she’s surrounded by the web of branches around her and she’s vulnerable, but fighting her way out.

When people outside Iran talk about Iranian society, there are two extremes: conservatives covered in beards and chadors, and glamorous, Barbie-style women with coiffed, blonde hair. I think this is the country’s own fault; we did not allow foreign photographers in for so long that they are drawn to the photogenic extremes. I strive to take the invisible in Iran and make them visible to the outside world.