

FOR THE LOVE OF TREES



TOMAS FRYDRYCH

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I am a Scottish landscape and nature photographer working with traditional black and white analogue processes. I am particularly interested in exploring the landscape photograph as a visual narrative, rather than purely an expression of aesthetics, looking for a deeper understanding of how photography can facilitate a more profound experience of, and an emotional connection to, the natural world, and, especially, the human function and impact within it.

Photography has always been a part of my life. Born at the tail end of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia, my mother was a professional photographer, and so there was always a camera around. I got my first very own one around the age of seven or eight, and learnt to develop my own film a few years later, then in my teens pursued nuthatches through the local woods with an 8mm motion film camera.

During these early years I was fascinated by the processes that made analogue photography possible rather than interested in the end product, and my efforts rarely made it beyond the self-developed negatives. This changed in the 1990s, which brought opportunities to travel, and subsequently to bore captive audiences with prolonged slide shows—I embraced these new possibilities offered to me by the E6 process wholeheartedly, and have thousands of slides to prove it.

While I have always gravitated strongly toward nature thanks to my upbringing and childhood experiences, my photography became distinctly landscape-focused after I landed in Scotland in the mid 1990s, documenting adventures in the Scottish hills. Looking back,

I was an ‘incidental photographer’—photography was important to me, but nevertheless secondary to other things I was doing.

I have some cherished landscapes from those years, for incidental photography comes with a wealth of opportunities. Out there at all kinds of locations, at all times of the day, and in all weather, the incidental photographer has, statistically speaking, a good chance of running into photographically interesting conditions. By the same token, they lack the luxury of spending a long time finding just the right vantage point or waiting for the light to change, fundamentally, doing something else. And so I gradually came to appreciate that quality photographs are rarely just taken, but rather consciously made, sometime waiting on the same spot for hours for the right conditions, sometimes coming back again and again and again.

In 2018, after a 15 year digital hiatus, I returned to using film. In some ways, this marks a return to that fascination with the analogue processes of my younger self, but on a qualitatively different level. My older self appreciates the capacity of black and white photography to distil a scene to its essence and is drawn to the unique expressive quality of the traditional wet print, and, not least of all, to its archival properties—there are not many things in our world today that have the potential to be around in a hundred years time.

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FOREWORD

One side of the street I grew up on was lined by old plum trees left over from the gardens that were there long before our housing scheme came. Among them, right in front of our block of flats, were a couple of self-seeded maples that I came to think of as my own. I got to know them intimately, spending lot of time high up in their swaying crowns, and recall the distinct sense of loss when one of them was cut down, because it was too close to the telephone wires.

Throughout my school and teenage years the woods and forests outside of our city provided a space to escape to from the urban hustle and bustle, a shade in the heat of the summer, protection from the rain during overnight camping. For a number of years in the 1980s I spent the entire of July with a group of boys of similar age camping in the middle of a forest, without modern amenities but learning about and from nature; those were some of the happiest moments of my childhood and they profoundly shaped my future outlook on life.

Back then I took the trees for granted, something I did not come to appreciate until encountering the bare landscapes of the Scottish Highlands in the mid 1990s. I used to miss two things from the 'old country': forests and bread, but I have since learnt to bake. I still miss the forests, being able to walk among trees for hours at a time. Here in Scotland most woodlands can be explored in their entirety in the space of a couple of hours, if that.

Scotland's bare landscapes have a certain beauty to them, which tourists come from the world over to experience. I too was enchanted by it to start with: the moors, the late summer heather, the occasional clump of birks breaking the monotony. To the visitor, conditioned by a long history of romanticising Scottish landscape through writing, painting, and, of course, photography, this appears to be the land of unspoiled, untamed wilderness, a *tabula rasa* for a modern day adventure.

Alas, this is an illusion, for this barren landscape is entirely human made. Hard to believe, I know. I recall another photographer opining over the absence of trees on Rannoch Moor: it must be the weather! It is, emphatically, not the weather, as commercial forestry operations on the moor show. The reality is more sobering,

for the denuded landscape of Scotland is down to three things: sheep, deer and grouse; overgrazing and muirburn.

This unnatural bareness comes at a cost. In our latitudes trees are a critical part of the ecosystem, providing a framework within which other species function, from fungi and insects up to birds and mammals. Take the trees away and not much is left behind, a bio desert; degraded soil incapable of absorbing, and holding onto rain water, which in a climate as wet as ours means landslides and downstream flooding.

The critical role of trees within local ecosystems means that we cannot simply replace a tree lost here in Scotland (whether now or a century ago) with one somewhere else in the world—we should be as concerned about the lack of trees in Scotland as we might be about the ongoing deforestation of the Amazon. There needs to be a shift in our collective attitude to trees that would allow for a nationwide push toward ecologically sound change on our own doorstep.

However, wishing for the reforestation of Scotland is not without significant challenges, for it is not simply a question of planting some trees, but of a major change in land use. That comes at a human cost: such transformation cannot be achieved without a radical cull of the oversized deer population, a ban on muirburn, and changes in farming practices. The human impact of such changes cannot be cavalierly waved away, not least because the rural communities that would be affected most by such changes often find themselves in difficult economic circumstances already.

Then there is the question of what trees we should plant. To some the answer is obvious: native trees, of course! Personally, I don't give much weight to the 'native species' moniker, for it is somewhat arbitrary, defined by a choice of a point in the past as the normative state of affairs. This makes little sense to me, ecosystems are never static. It is also perfectly feasible to choose a normative time point that makes the Scots pine a non-native species (e.g., the normative date for Pleistocene rewilding precedes the arrival of the Scots pine in Scotland by some 2,000 years).

Whatever little value the 'native species' concept might have, is erased by climate change. Individual tree species thrive only in narrow temperature bands and on the current trajectory it is almost certain that by the end of the century our climatic conditions will be unsuitable for at least some of our current species (Scots pine, once common across the whole of the UK, disappeared from the south largely due to a warming climate some 5,000 years ago). In the natural life cycle of a tree seventy five years marks just about the end of adolescence; this should give us pause for thought.

Whether Scotland will be warmer or colder by the end of the century is by no means certain. While the world as a whole is on a trajectory for a temperature increase of several degrees, as ice sheets continue to melt, northern Europe will eventually turn considerably colder due to a collapse of the sea currents that keep our climate warmer than it otherwise would be at this latitude. The current prevailing scientific consensus is that such a collapse is unlikely to happen before the end of the century, nevertheless some recent modelling suggests it could happen within a mere twenty five years. As far as trees are concerned this change, when it comes, will be as significant as the projected warming.

There is also the matter of timber. Given that concrete is one of the single biggest sources of CO₂, it is imperative that we wean ourselves off its gratuitous use. Timber has an essential part to play in that, and timber in our current climate almost certainly means Sitka spruce.

It is often said these days that we are planting too much Sitka in Scotland. I might once have agreed, but exploring some of the plantations near home in recent years has forced me to change my perspective on this tree. I now see the objections of my younger self as a form of NIMBY-ism: we are shielding ourselves from the reality of our lifestyles by importing the majority of our construction timber. And it is not as if these unsightly commercial forests do not support lively and complex ecosystems.

It is not that we plant too much Sitka in Scotland, but simply that we do not plant enough trees. The official governmental tree planting targets could easily be two, three, times bigger. More trees would allow for a better balance of the species and forest types and for better planning around the unpredictability of the future. (And we have the land: as much as a fifth of Scotland's landmass is set aside and kept barren for the sake of grouse shooting, arguably the most environmentally destructive non-essential activity in the country.)

That said, I would like to see a different approach to commercial forestry in Scotland. The profit margin driven practice of clear felling is nothing more than environmental vandalism, a wholesale destruction of large, interconnected ecosystems. Even when

promptly replanted, it takes decades for these ecosystems to recover.

Recent years have seen the arrival of tree planting as a way of natural carbon capture. As much I welcome any newly planted tree, this is yet another misconstrued enterprise driven by tax incentives and the discredited trading in carbon offsets. Trees matter beyond their capacity to sequester CO₂ and need to be planted with a view toward restoring and maintaining whole ecosystems, something by no means guaranteed within these operations. Contemporary examples of significant environmental damage done by such projects are not hard to come by and are well documented.

Nor is large scale buying up of land for rewilding by wealthy individuals and NGOs a credible way forward. These are just new incarnations of the absentee laird, corporate and individual alike, and the communities affected often perceive this practice as a new form of highland clearances. If nothing else, it amounts to an exploitation of a broken landownership model, the furthering of private agendas without any real accountability. No matter the motivations, I have little doubt this will come back to haunt us within a generation.

Trees run into other competing interests, notably forests and wind farms do not mix; wind farm topology is carefully constructed around natural surface airflows, and trees disrupt these. As much as a transition toward cleaner electricity generation matters, it is not everything, for the current ecological crisis cannot be reduced to CO₂ alone. The current gold rush for renewables in Scotland is restricting the possible future land uses of large swathes of the country for decades to come, and in many cases it is quite obviously not the best of options. We are deluding ourselves if we think that Big Wind cares about the environment any more than Big Oil, they are the two sides of the same coin, quite literally.

These are complex and, unsurprisingly, divisive issues. However, none of these complexities, and different perspectives due to our personal circumstances and communal histories, should distract us from the central matter: trees are fundamental to our very existence. Without the reversal of their loss our own survival is in peril.

Nor must we resign ourselves to the current state of affairs on account of these complexities. Just because the politicians across the spectrum seem incapable of dealing with the bigger picture, does not mean that no practical way forward is possible. For example, the *Land Stewardship: a Blueprint for Government Policy* document produced way back in 2017 by the Scottish Wildlife Trust has much to recommend it, and it could serve as a starting point for hammering out the details of a viable national policy (beyond the vacuousness that is the official *Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045*).

Whatever the future holds for the land, it will be starkly different from what we know now, for we are at a critical ecological turning point, the current *status quo* is ending one way or another. The only open question is whether Scotland will be a better or worse place to live. The choice is ours, we have the necessary expertise.

But expertise alone is not enough, what is needed is a healthy dose of shared passion. The following photographs are the expression of my life long passion. My hope is that they can help a few others to start thinking about trees in a different way.

NOTES ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs in this book were taken across the Scottish mainland over a six year period starting in 2018. Selecting images for this project was not easy, for I have many more than the seventy presented here; the ones I chose I did because I felt they have a story to tell. They were taken using a variety of cameras and black and white film stocks, and those interested in such matters will find the relevant information at the end of the book.

There is a personal emotion underpinning each of these images. For example, some of the Scots pines were photographed at locations that have seen rapid regeneration in the last three decades and that fill me with the sense of joy and hope, for they demonstrate dramatic change is possible within a single lifetime. Others were taken in long established woodlands that are demonstrably dying; the tale-tell sign of the latter is the lack of seedlings on the ground, invariably the consequence of grazing.

One of my favourite trees is the beech, and so beeches are perhaps somewhat overrepresented, though I expect we might see more of this magnificent tree in Scotland if temperatures continue to rise. Most of the beech photographs come from an early film photography project of mine exploring the form of that particular tree, entitled *Confessions of a Beechbum*.

A number of photographs in this book are from my ongoing project with the working title *Also Scotland*, which explores Scottish land beyond the edge of the conventional landscape photograph, outwith of the interest of a typical landscape photographer. These were never intended as pretty wall art; rather they are asking questions about our relationship with the land, and the role of photography in it.

The photographs are grouped loosely into seven chapters, around ideas and emotions that trees evoke in me, as a way of steering the viewer. Whether looking at these images evokes similar ideas in others is neither here nor there—we each see what we see, feel what we feel.

The first chapter, *Tenacity*, explores the thing about trees that fascinates me the most: their capacity to establish themselves in unexpected, seemingly impossible locations, to carve out a life for themselves in places that no human gardener would consider, and to adapt to what life throws at them.

It took me a long time to appreciate that trees are fundamentally cooperative species, working together, even communicating through their intertwined root systems. The solitary tree, so beloved by photographers everywhere, is usually a sign of some ecological deficiency. Indeed, a woodland is perhaps best seen as a complex organism in its own right. It is this aspect of the trees existence that is explored in chapter two, *Togetherness*.

Trees that are allowed to function in their normal way have the capacity to live for a very long time, indeed trees are some of the longest living organisms on the planet. Here in Scotland we have a yew tree under which it is said Pontius Pilate was born; while the legend is unlikely to be true, it is not because that particular tree would not be old enough to be contemporary of the Roman garrison in Fortingall. Chapter three, *Witness*, looks at the capacity of trees to bear testimony to the events of the past.

Of course, individual trees, like all living things, eventually die. But there are two kinds of dead trees: those whose lives carry on through their offspring, and those that die alone. Chapter four, *Transience*, explores these themes.

Chapter five, *Intersection*, presents the viewer with various points where the lives of trees, for better or worse, intersect with human activity.

Chapter six, *Reclamation*, is a tribute to the capacity of trees to spontaneously recolonise land previously damaged by other uses. Exploring these, not always pretty, locations has made me appreciate that this is the necessary first step in ecological restoration, for without the trees nothing much else happens in such places. But once the trees take a foothold, things start moving rapidly from there on.

The final chapter, *Inspiration*, is simply about the experience of being near trees. A woodland is a place that fosters reflection on the complexities of life, where minds can be cleared and quietened down. A treasured resource that everyone should have easy access to.

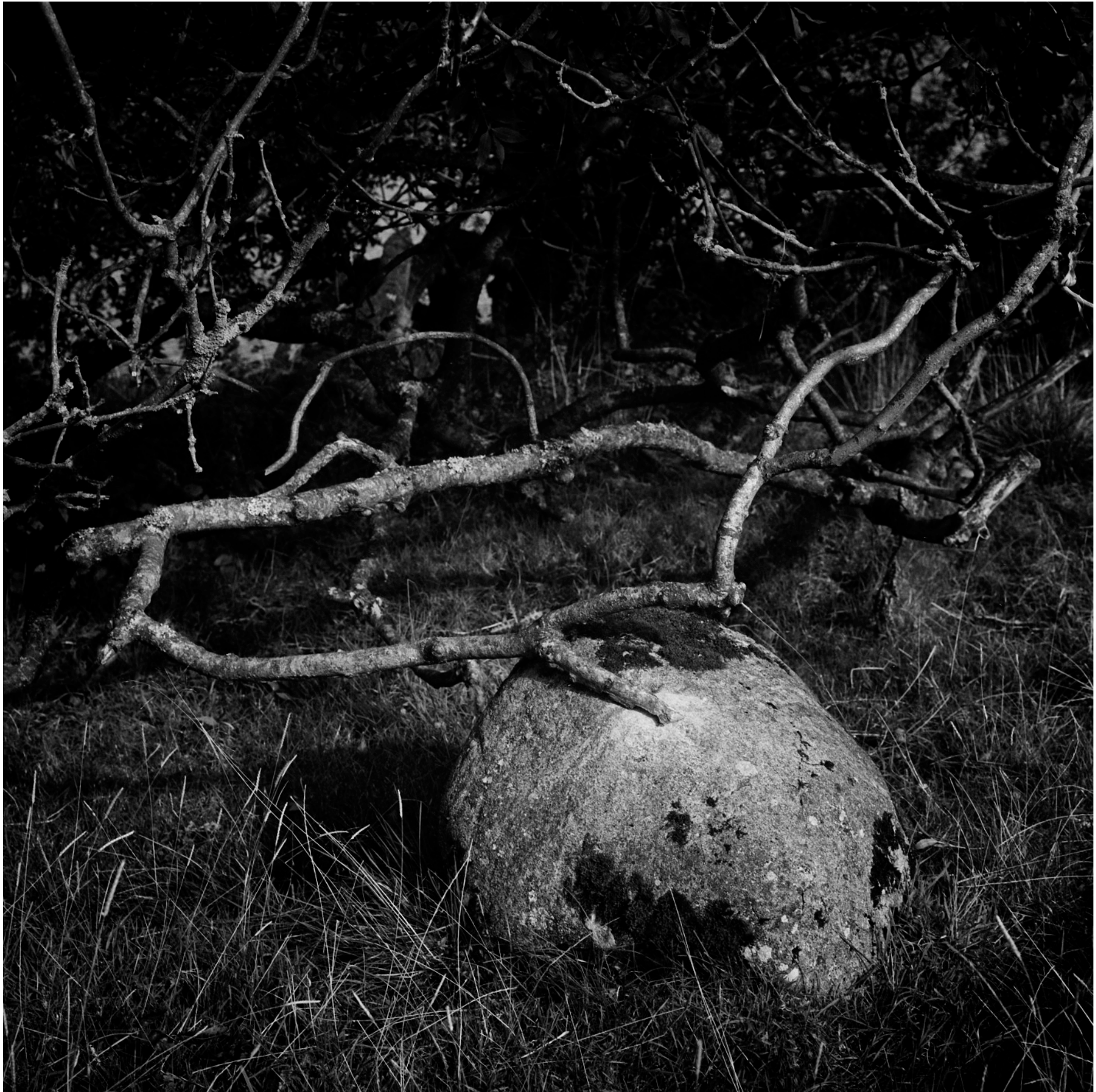
Finally, most of the images in this book are available as handmade silver gelatine prints. Anybody interested in a print can contact me for further information through the website, <https://tf.photography>.

I

TENACITY



Against the Flow



When Tree Met a Rock



Persistence



Open Water Swimming



Unfazed



The Rock and the Hard Place



Carry On Growing



Against Darkness



Slippery Slope



After a Storm



Wind



The Tree that Refused to Die

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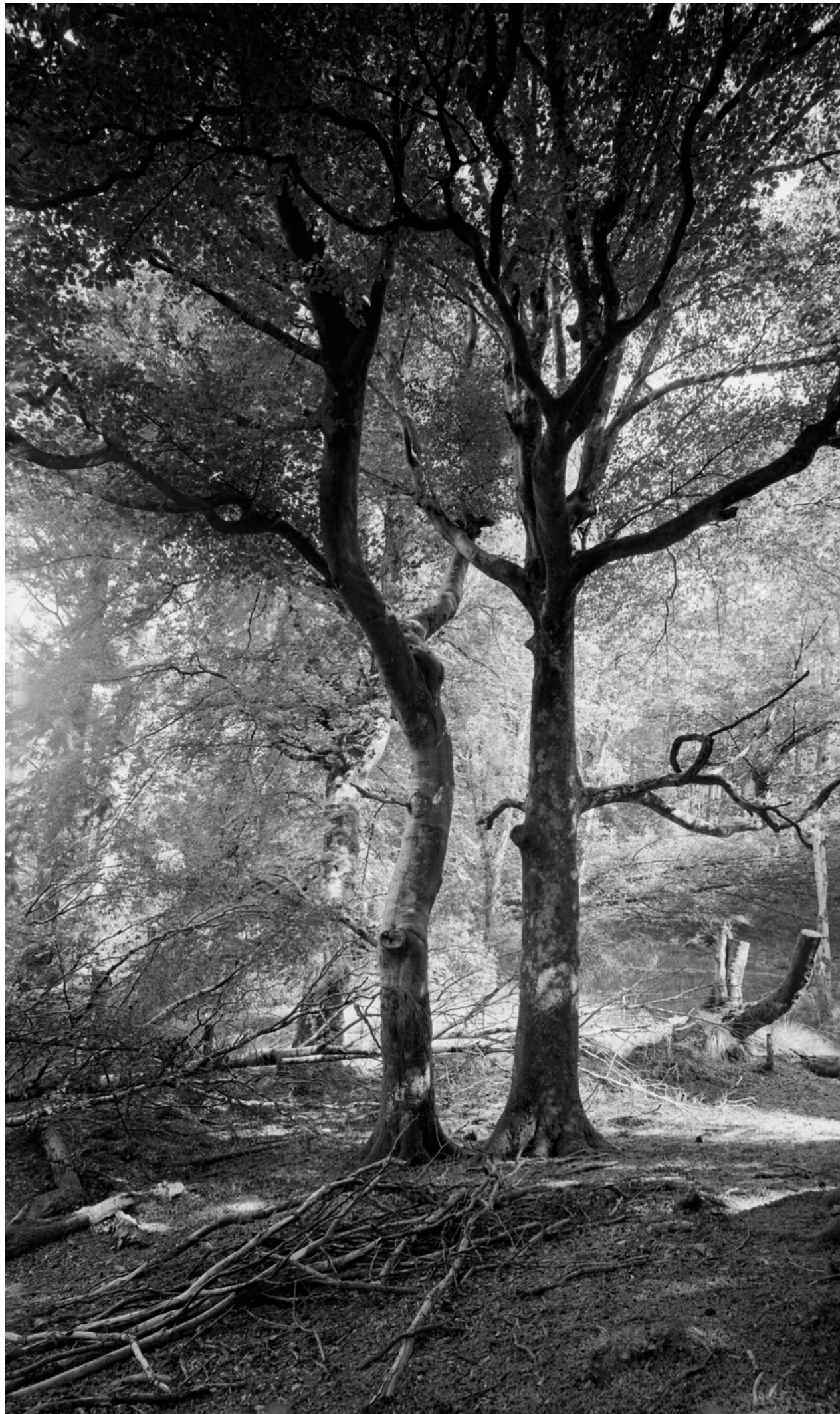
TOGETHERNESS



A Beech among Spruces



The Boundary



Old Couple



Sunlit Beeches



Holding On for Dear Life



Out of the Mist



Sheep Country



Our Favourite Woods



Oak Seedling



Canopy



Sycamore



WITNESS



Tales of Love, Storms and Breakups



The Class of 1980



Scars



An Ancient of Days



Rings and Saw Marks

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TRANSIENCE



Wind in the Woods



The Death of a Forest



Gone with the Wind



Broken



Last Gasps



Rotten to the Core



Dreams Unfulfilled



Remembered



End of the Line



In Memoriam

V

INTERSECTION



Tree on a Farm



The Ballad of Mack the Knife



Harvested



Scottish Pastoral



Still (Un)Life



Work in Progress



Oaks and Barbed Wire



Confinement



Old Farm Trees



Below Ben Lomond



Underneath the Canopy



Viewpoint



Done and Dusted

VI

RECLAMATION



The Pine and the Spoil Heap



Once upon a Time



Sycamore among Birks



Ghosts of Farmers Past



Inside Out



M80 Northbound



Takeover



Dr Beeching's Trees



An Adventure in Old Brickworks

VII

INSPIRATION



Into the Light



Over the Edge



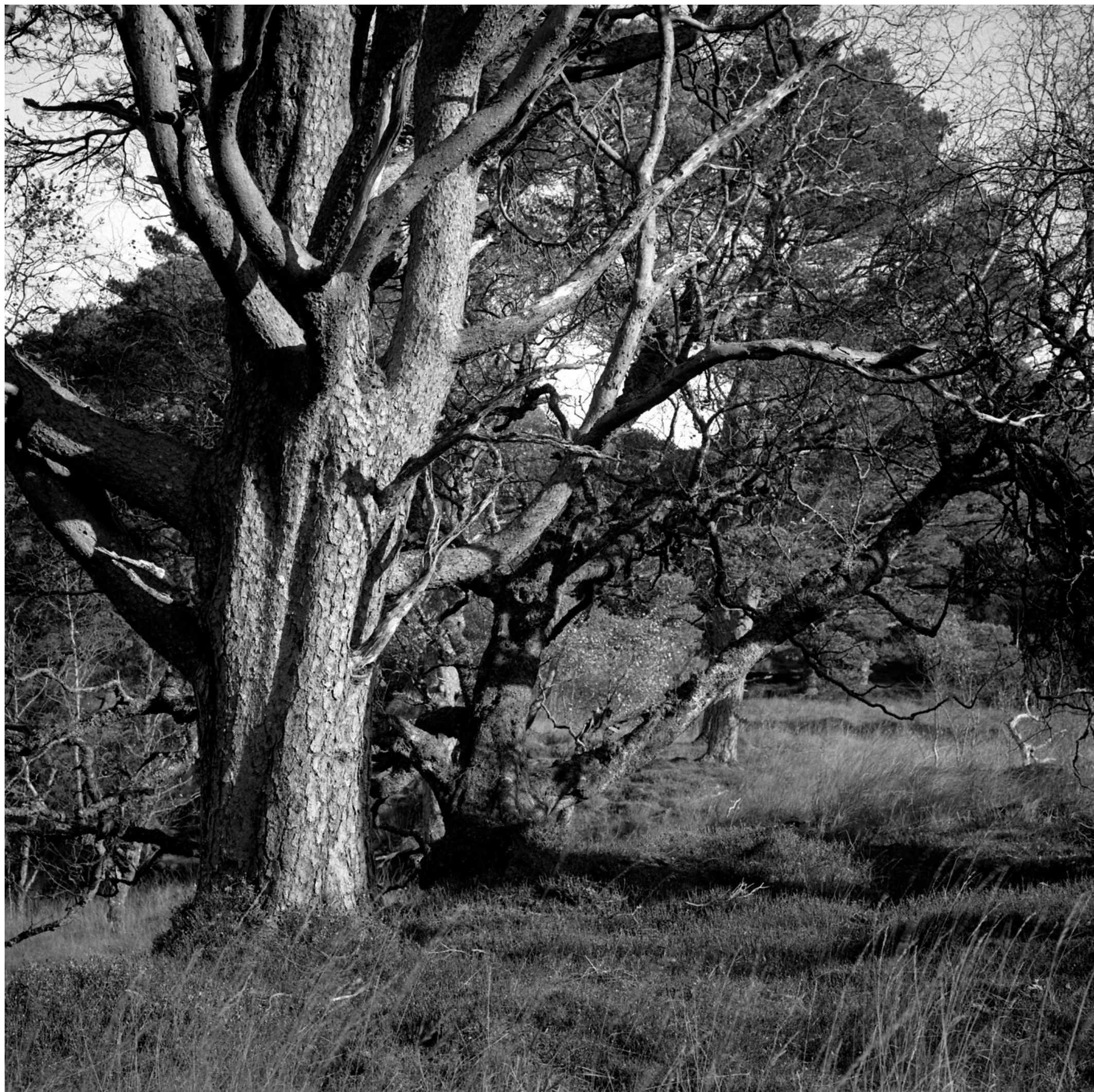
Hazelwood Dawn



Heavenwards



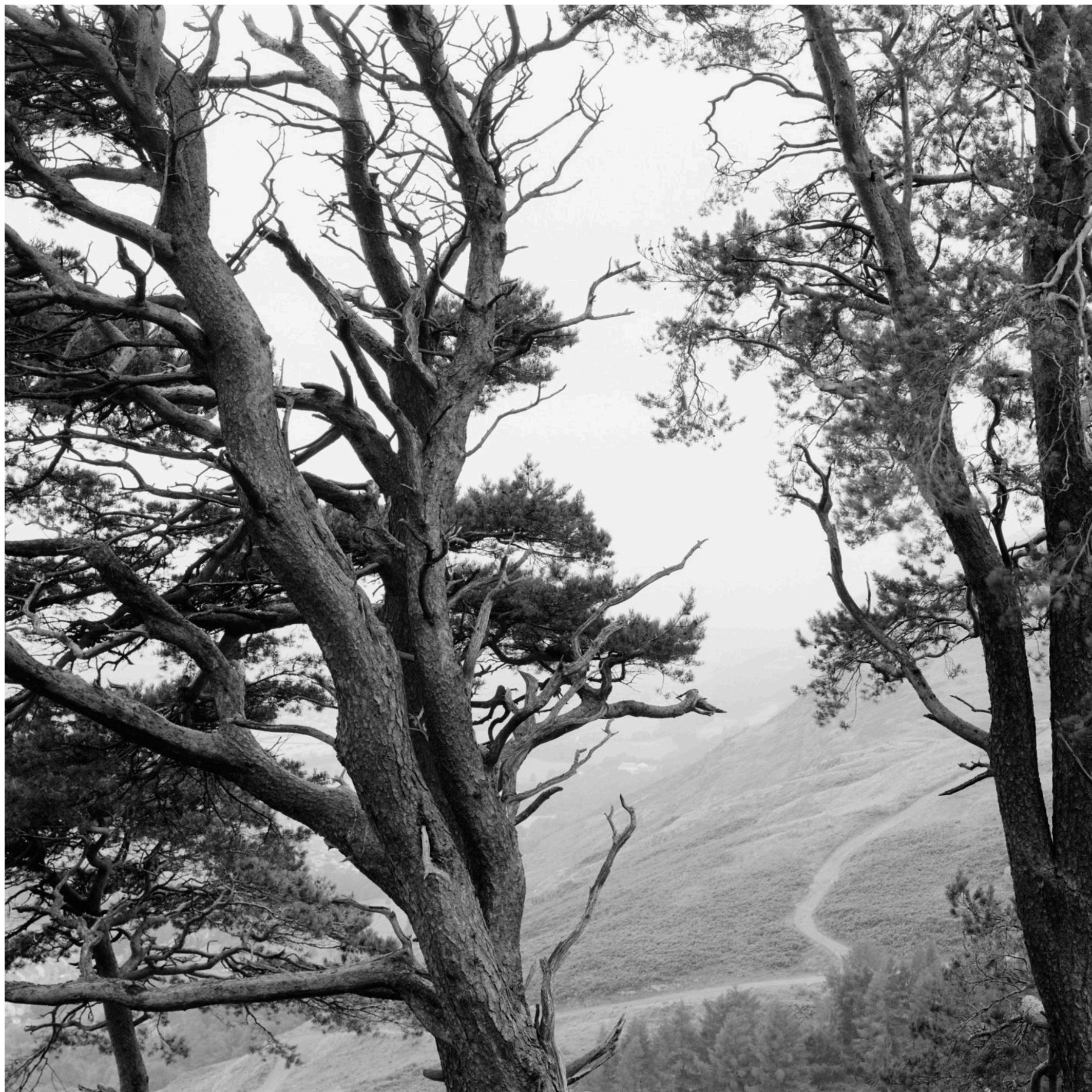
New Beginnings



Restored to Life



Reaching Out



Onwards and Upwards



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Not All Windows Are Made Equal

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