

GUY HAND

Your Lying Eyes

The truth of a place might be hidden in plain view

As our photo crew drove west along the winding road from Fort William to Mallaig, a slender freshwater loch caught our eyes. It lay there on the left, tangled in the mist and melancholy light that seem endemic to Highland Scotland. The five of us, scouting locations for a series of Scotch whiskey ads, scrambled out of the car, grabbed equipment, and began hiking the loch's western shore. Soon its silvery waters slid into the kind of God-sent composition every photographer prays for. The art director framed the image with his hands, the copywriter scribbled notes, the second assistant and I set up a tripod, and our photographer—a former *National Geographic* shooter gone commercial—pulled a lens from a case crammed with lenses. Our camera framed green, treeless hills soaring from left and right, the loch caught tightly between them, shimmering from bright foreground to brooding, black horizon. In the loch itself were small islands, exquisitely placed: one camera left, another farther back, camera right. The whole scene seemed to capture something quintessentially Scottish, and took $f/32$ to pull into focus.

But what caught my eye was really none of that. I saw the trees first: eighty-foot-tall pines, their trunks straight, bare, and cinnamon red, spreading near their tops into an interlacing canopy of green. They clustered on each of those islands, and only on those islands, like castaways adrift on a heather sea.

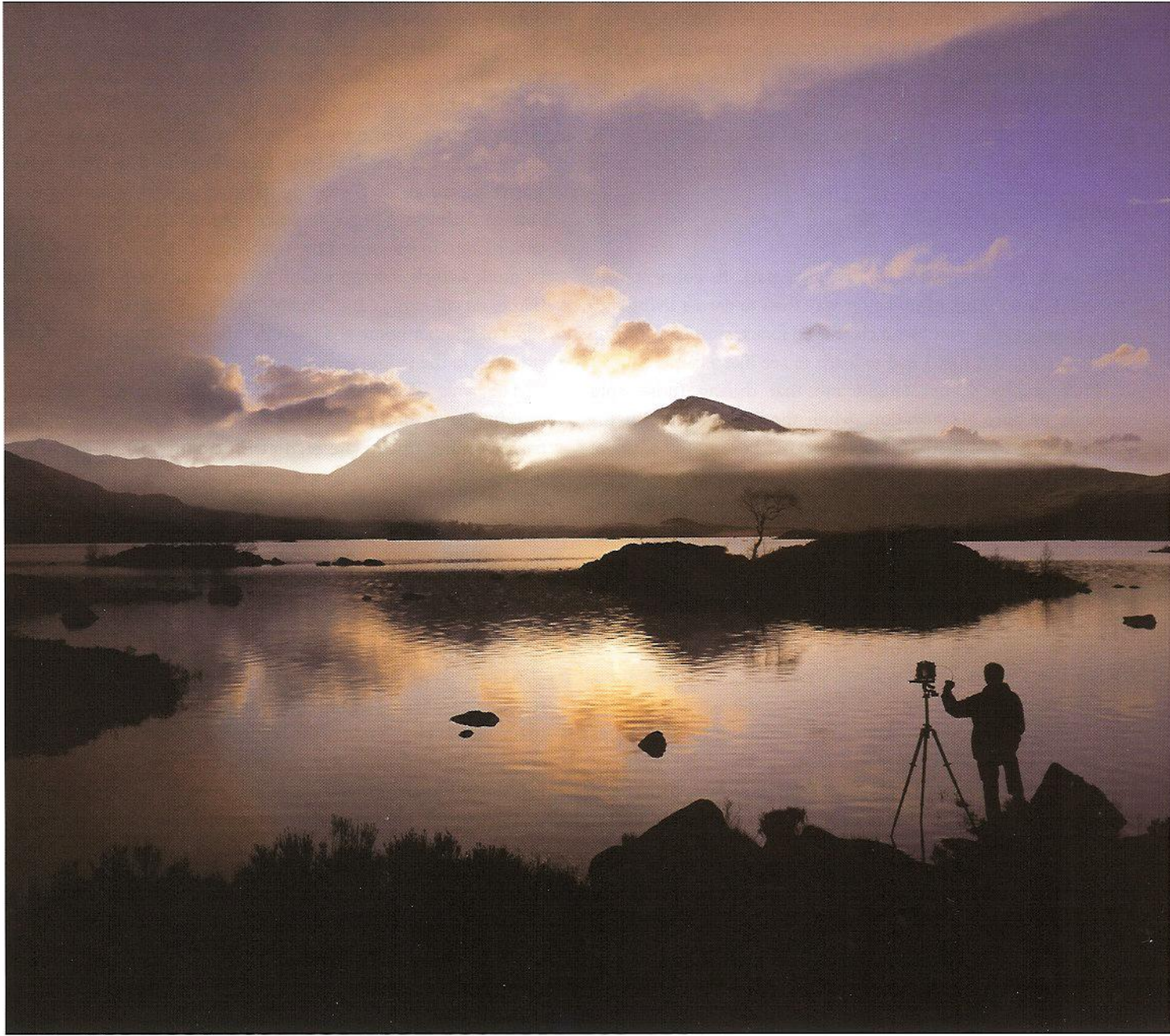
We hadn't come to the Highlands for the trees. We'd come for the treeless terrain that matched the images stamped in our heads by legions of prior photographers: the fabled heathered moors, the shimmering lochs, those huggable Highland sheep—what we saw without question as the authentic, primal Scotland. Details that didn't fit, whether tartan-draped tourist-trap or towering tree, we'd edit away. That, after all, is half the photographer's job: to frame away whatever contradicts the perceived essence of place.

But those trees were beautiful. So we kept them in the crop,

though none of us had the time to ask why they so tenaciously clung to that otherwise treeless ground. A storm was brewing, we'd found our shot, and soon we were gone. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that we had missed something on the shores of that loch, that something ineffable had eluded every click of the shutter.

Over the next few weeks I began seeing other castaway trees: a few alders huddled against a streambank, a lone oak guarding the crest of a hill, a small woodland on the edge of a sheep meadow, fenced in and thick as Highland rain. Always isolated, always surrounded by vacant land. The tourist brochures and travel guides didn't explain those trees, nor did the locals. The trees they spoke of, and generally disparaged, were those contained in rigidly geometric timber farms, alien species grown in laser-straight rows and cut at harvest like corn. Any earnest investigation was precluded by our dawn-to-dusk shooting schedule. Yet one evening, after a long day of bitter wind and bad light, I climbed the stairs toward my hotel room, too cold and tired for dinner, and picked up a book left on a hall table—a travel book, I supposed, perfect for putting me to sleep.

In fact, it was a hard history of the Highlands. In a few pages of prose, *Skye: The Island*, by James Hunter, revealed a Scotland I'd missed through the viewfinder. A Highland landscape full of pine, oak, alder, and ash; a place where children memorized the Gaelic alphabet through the names of trees, grew up in homes made of wood, and spent their lives shadowed by forest; a Highland Scotland slowly, over centuries, stripped of trees for shipbuilding, the Industrial Revolution, and agriculture. Through our lens, the Highlands had looked as primal and unsullied as any wilderness in the world. It was nothing of the kind. We'd been photographing an ancient clearcut, one of the most thoroughly deforested lands on Earth.



The “meaning” of the things I framed—whether a Highland loch or a bullet hole punched through a human skull—faded as soon as I focused on them.

inside a cultural predilection that values nature foremost for its visual appeal, its eye-popping, awe-inspiring grandeur. After all, America's national parks were created not primarily for their ecological importance, but for their alluring beauty. And any conservationist will tell you it's an uphill battle to win support for an environmental subject that isn't pleasing to look at. We pictorial recorders of nature—and that includes painters, videographers, and filmmakers as well as still photographers—are simply obeying that aesthetic imperative. With rare exception, our jobs depend on it.

We turn the ecological world on its head, making the rare common and the common rare by continually focusing on the exceptional and the dramatic, while ignoring the plentiful and the routine, by shunning the complicated and chaotic for the graphic and orderly, the dark and dull for the bright and colorful, the mini for the mega, the slime-covered for the furbearing, the peopled for the unpopulated. We travel the world conjuring facsimiles of nature that exist only in the treeless terrain of our own heads.

So, as our crew shot the heathered Highlands, we also shot aspen groves cloaked in autumn leaves, snowfields raked by winter sun, and rainforests draped in dew. And we justified our pictorial clichés by clinging to the belief that they nourished a visual interest in nature and therefore sparked environmental awareness. Yet nature photography sells whiskey, SUVs, and real estate at least as efficiently as it sells conservation. I only had to recall a favorite shooting spot—a photogenic mountain range or a lovely river, perhaps—now spoiled to photography by trophy homes or rutted roads to see that our visual affection for nature leads no more directly to environmental protection than lust leads to love.



The trees that started my wondering, the trees stranded on those beautiful islands in that slender loch, were Scotch pines, *Pinus sylvestris*—remnants of the once vast forest of Caledonia, spared simply because they stood a short distance offshore, just beyond the swing of busy axes and the mouths of hungry sheep. For Dewar's we shot a vintage steam train as it rumbled along the loch, framed by those Scotch pines. Later, with another crew, I helped shoot an ad for Timberland shoes: a red-haired model (flown up from London) casually walking a dock (cut off at waterline a hundred yards away and floated into position) carrying (rented) oars over a (tastefully wardrobed) shoulder. Despite our artful fiddling with props, the pines were the heroes of that shot.

The ad won a Clio Award. The magazine *American Photographer* proclaimed that the image captured "a natural utopia." ❧

Trout Stream

Flash by flash as if an exorcist

had just freed them from their skins
to shoot through a flexible world where
everything happens at once, freed to
swim in and out of selves new at each gleam
so where they end is where they begin and
flashes prickling the body make
everywhere the same and nowhere so
they are their own reflections moving
as music among bolts of a current quick
as a thought of itself as something else,
so you have to take hold of yourself and
step back before you lose your balance
and fall in.

—Brian Swann