

By the Roadside

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

I am returning to the railway station after spending the weekend with a friend who lives here in the mountains of Japan's Nagano Prefecture. Near his house is a small shrine with an ancient cherry tree in front of it. The tree is in full bloom. When I passed it two days ago on the way to the house it was cloaked in blossoms whose pure white was made all the sharper by the enamel blue sky above. Children were playing around it while adults spread mats on the ground nearby and indulged in the Japanese pastime of *hanami*, the viewing of the flowers. They ate and drank and sang old songs all day long and well into the night. The tree was also happy, I think.

Today the tree is alone. A drizzling fog hangs low overhead; the tree's branches seem to hang more heavily on this cold, wet morning. Its glorious blossoms appear a burden; their white has melted into the monochrome fog. Poles that support the great weight of the old tree's branches have become crutches for this infirm old-timer. The fog, in stripping the landscape of its color, has also robbed the tree of its once-yearly dignity.

The taxi driver waits in his heated car as I walk slowly around the tree. He doesn't even look up from the comic book he pulled from beneath his seat and began reading the instant I stepped from the car. I continue walking around the tree and the drizzle becomes an insistent little rain, the irritating kind that is just enough to be called uncomfortable, but not so strong or driving enough to be a really respectable downpour. There is a sign just beyond the tree with its history written on it, but this unwelcoming rain convinces me to return to the car without reading it.

I look back at the tree as we drive away. It must be several centuries old: I should have read the signboard so that I might quote it here. But I was remiss in

my duties as a writer, so I cannot tell of what the aged tree itself has seen.

When this tree was young, Japanese men of the warrior class carried on their daily affairs with two swords thrust through their sash. It was forbidden for members of the lower classes to wear silk or gold. Travel, for the great mass of the people, was virtually impossible. People were born, grew up, raised their families, and died in the same village. Travel overseas was forbidden on pain of death.

How far this country has come in the lifetime of this single plant. The world beyond has changed as well: when this tree was the height of a man, Tsars ruled the empire of Russia, and the United States of America was a concept beyond any utopian dreamer's wildest imaginings. There was no Germany or Italy as we now know them. All has changed within this single lifespan.

I get out of the taxi at the station and check my watch as I buy my ticket. I had better rush to make the train, so I can rush back to Tokyo and rush to complete my work just as everyone else does. The modern world, East or West or wherever, seems to have a thirty-minute attention span, just barely long enough to gulp down the evening news on TV. All the way home I think about what has happened to Japan and the world since that tree sent its first tender shoot into the mountain sunlight. From the tree's perspective, we humans must be skittering around like cockroaches in a panic. That quiet old tree, freighted with blossoms and age, has just got to be laughing at us.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.



