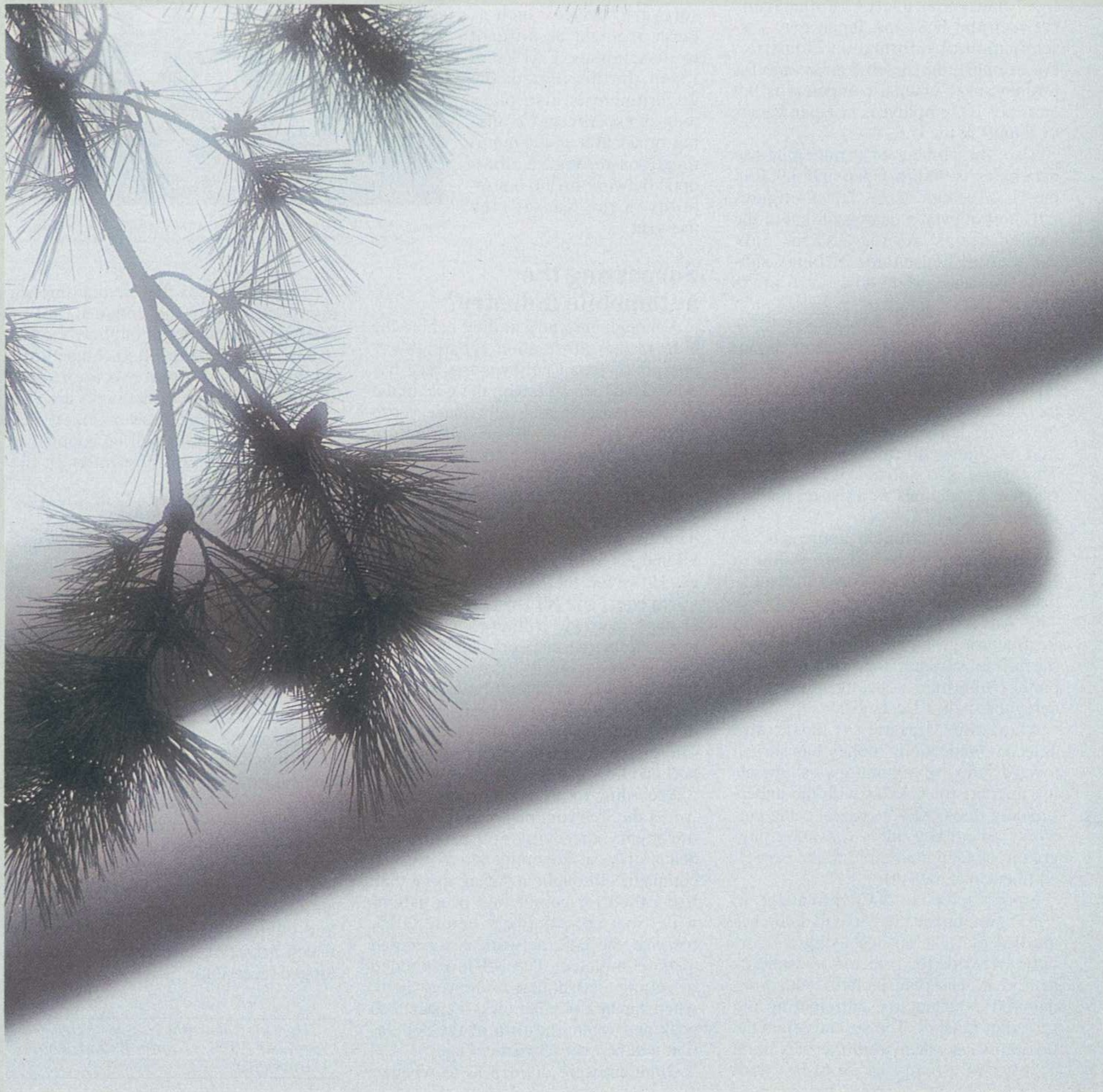
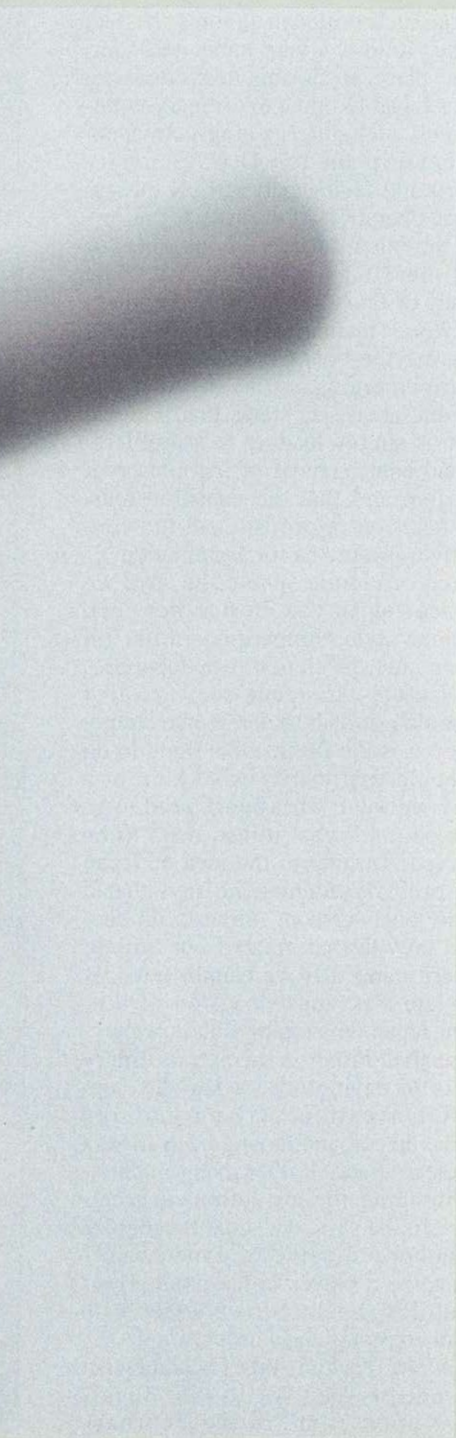
Through the Morning Mist

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





The Inland Sea is a flat unrippled mirror, reflecting the low, grey clouds of an early spring morning. The island-shapes that jut up from the quiet waters are half hidden in the mist; in the shadowless light they bring to mind an ancient, austere ink painting. I stand beneath a gnarled pine whose branches are stark and severe against the white dome of an 8-inch naval gun turret. The pale cannon barrels slant up toward the featureless low sky. For a moment, I am in a time when the present century was yet young, when such guns ruled the seas.

This is the island of Etajima, just opposite the port of Kure. The island is much like any of the others that dot this stretch of water hemmed in by Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Etajima, however, has one special establishment that over a century ago made the name of the island synonymous with the aspirations of Imperial Japan. In the early 1880s, this sleepy isle was selected as the site of a new academy to train officers for the young Imperial Japanese Navy. Modeled on the naval academies of Europe and America, it first felt the cadets' measured tread in 1885.

The academy grew, and its buildings were constructed in the ponderous stone and brick architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a style that echoed the longing of the Japanese leaders for their "place in the sun" with the imperial powers of Europe and an energetic, expansionist America. And from these buildings came year after year a stream of young officers who in little more than a generation built a navy where none had been before.

That all ended with Japan's cataclysmic defeat in 1945. The fleet lay rusting on the bottom of the Pacific. The nation was in ruins, prostrate, starving, exhausted. Etajima—a word once spoken with awe and pride—was banished from memory. The people of Japan grew to regard it as a place that had fostered too inordinate a conceit in a corps whose hubris had then dragged the nation into ruin. But the academy itself was virtually unscathed by the war; the impressive buildings remain and are now used as a training facility by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. Most modern Japanese are unaware, however, of the place or its history. The classic old gun turret—once the state of the art in naval technology—remains as a symbol of how things have changed, but in another sense accentuates how one aspect of Japan is in need of change.

Even a cursory look at Japanese society will reveal a decided tendency to ignore any uncomfortable problem until it is far too late to deal with it effectively. Such a tendency is dangerous, especially in regard to defense issues, of which the average Japanese is painfully uninformed. Given Japan's place in the world, it is time to pull the nation's head out of the sand and start looking ahead.

Unlike its prewar military establishment, the defense capability of modern Japan is firmly under civilian control; it is only fitting that the citizenry have a clear idea of what is before them. London's Institute of Strategic Studies has stated that in the year 2000, East Asia will be a dangerous neighborhood. It is reasonable to fear that if the public consciousness does not grow to fully appreciate the need for an understanding of these issues, the results of such ignorance might bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the consequences of that blind pride of a generation ago. ■

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