



Beauty Will Save the World

Volume II: Thirty Photographs of Japan

Stephen S. Ashley

2017

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FRONTISPIECE: *Cherry Blossoms No. 3, Kanazawa Castle, 2016*

VOLUME I of this series, *Thirty Photographs of Southern Utah*, described my approach to photography as an attempt to squeeze every drop of beauty from the scenes I have photographed in the hope of restoring the viewer's feeling of harmony with the world. I hope that, in the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, I have scooped up a small piece of truth and presented it as a living force. If so, then I can claim a modest success, for, as Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "Beauty will save the world."

In this second volume of the series, I offer 30 photographs I took during a trip to Japan in the spring of 2016 with my wife and son. I spent a week in Tokyo and then rode the *shinkansen* bullet train to Kanazawa, where I stayed for a few days. I took an ordinary express train from Kanazawa to Kyoto, where I visited a handful of the temples and shrines in that amazing city and took day trips to Nara and to the Suntory Yamazaki distillery in Shimamoto. I finished the trip with another *shinkansen* ride back to Tokyo.

Travelling as a tourist in Japan forced a modification to my approach to photography. Because I travelled from place to place by subway and train rather than personal car, I had to limit my photographic equipment to what I could easily carry. The temples and shrines in Japan do not permit the use of tripods, and in many locations I could not have used a tripod even if it were permitted because the crowds were overwhelming. So I left my tripod home, along with my heavy, cumbersome perspective control lens. In its place I brought a common 50mm *f*/1.8 lens and an 85mm *f*/1.8 lens.

In these pages I share the experience of taking these 30 photographs. I have learned from experience that viewers are sometimes curious about the stories that lie behind my photographs. To satisfy that curiosity I have provided a brief account of the making of each of them. When I thought I had something to share that might be of interest to other photographers, I have included descriptions of the techniques I used to take and process these photographs.

I went to Japan in early April knowing that my trip would coincide with cherry blossom season but not expecting anything more than some pretty trees. On the first day of my visit I did not go looking for cherry blossoms as I staggered out my hotel in an advanced state of jet lag and started wandering around the Ebisuminami district of Tokyo. My walk took me to the top of a hill overlooking the Meguro River. I descended via a street that took me straight down to the river.

When I arrived at the river, the meaning of “cherry blossom season” finally sunk in. The Meguro River follows a concrete waterway to Tokyo Bay; high concrete walls surround it on both sides. Ancient cherry trees grow along the sides, and their boughs, heavy with cherry blossoms, sweep across the stream. Cherry blossom petals drift steadily into the river, which carries them downstream.

The residents put on their best kimonos and come down to the Meguro River and other choice spots to admire the cherry blossoms, sip champagne, and take selfies. I descended along the northeast side of the river and, after several blocks, crossed the river, and walked back up on the southwest side. Looking in the direction of the river, you see the sweeping branches of cherry blossoms, brilliant against the gray walls of the concrete waterway, cherry blossom petals wafting downward in the breeze, and petals floating toward Tokyo Bay. Looking away from the river, you see the crowds of locals immersed in their enjoyment of the cherry blossom festivities.



Cherry Blossoms No. 5, Meguro River, 2016

I reached the Meguro River late in the afternoon, and the sky was overcast, so very little light illuminated the scene. In several cases, the cherry blossoms stretched from the foreground to the background, which required small apertures in order to achieve deep depth of field. In order to accommodate the low light and small apertures, I was forced to use high ISOs, up to 6,400. Although the use of high ISOs sometimes leads to excessive noise, the noise in a cherry blossom image gets lost in the busyness of the image itself. If these images contained large areas of blue sky, the story might be different. Transforming the images to black and white made the noise look like the grain with which we are familiar in black and white prints from the era of Kodak Tri-X film, still the world's best selling black and white film. Had I printed the images in color, the noise would have been noticeable and annoying.



Cherry Blossoms No. 6, Meguro River, 2016

I have since learned that the cherry blossom season symbolizes something quite at odds with the festive atmosphere I encountered along the Meguro River. The Japanese traditionally view the cherry blossoms wistfully as manifesting the transience of life. The blossoms burst into bloom and linger for a few days or weeks, drift in the breeze, and float away to oblivion.



Cherry Blossoms No. 11, Meguro River, 2016



Cherry Blossoms No. 12, Meguro River, 2016



Cherry Blossoms No. 13, Meguro River, 2016



Cherry Blossoms No. 15, Meguro River, 2016

At the Imperial Palace I was struck by the stonework in the palace walls. The masons carved the irregularly shaped stones to fit together perfectly. The walls reminded me of pictures I have seen of similar walls at Machu Picchu.

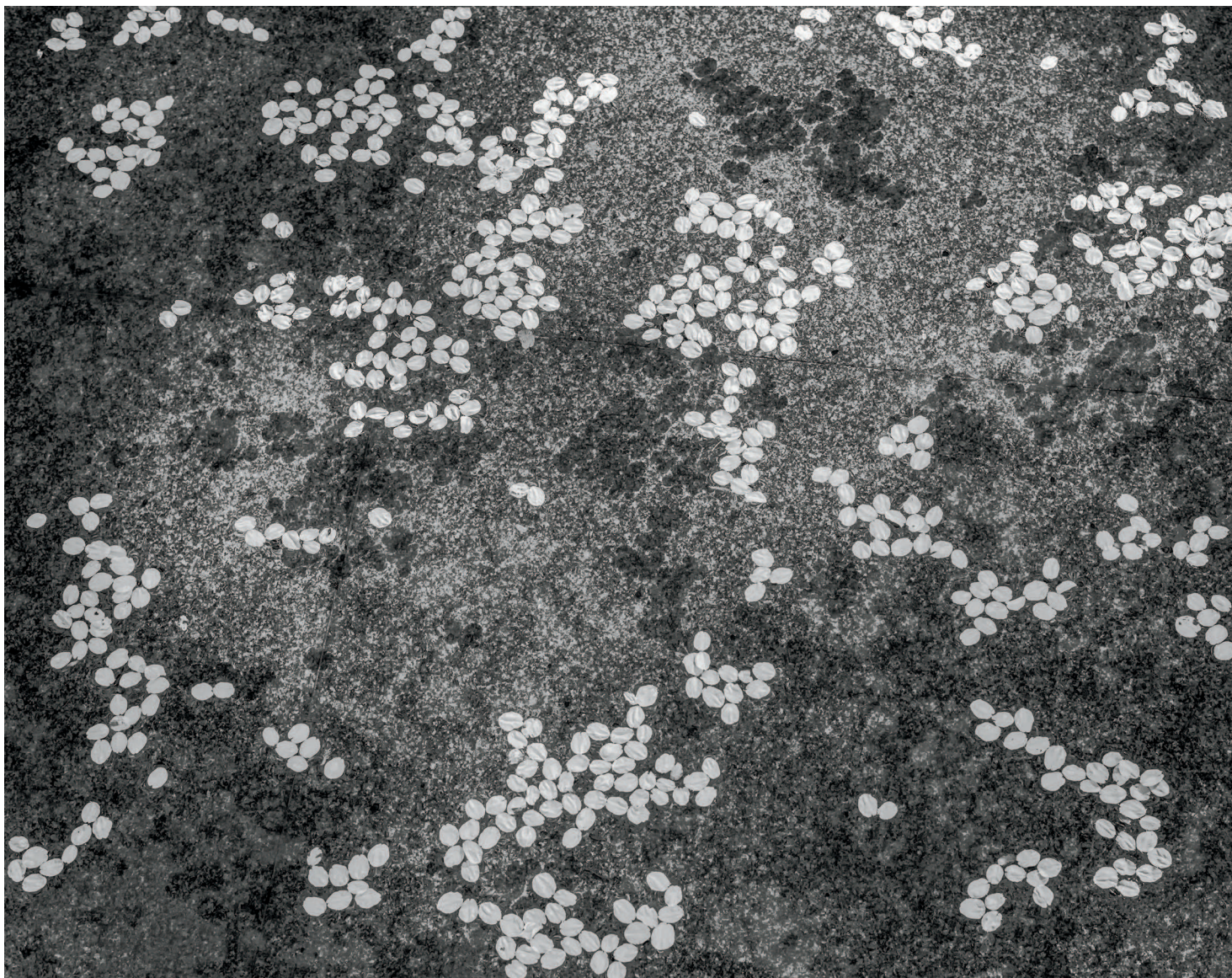


Palace Wall No. 4, Tokyo, 2016



Palace Wall No. 5, Tokyo, 2016

In front of the Tokyo National Museum are shallow pools that catch the drifting cherry blossoms.



Cherry Blossom Petals No. 1, Tokyo National Museum, 2016

Behind the museum is another grove of cherry trees.



Cherry Blossoms No. 4, Tokyo National Museum, 2016

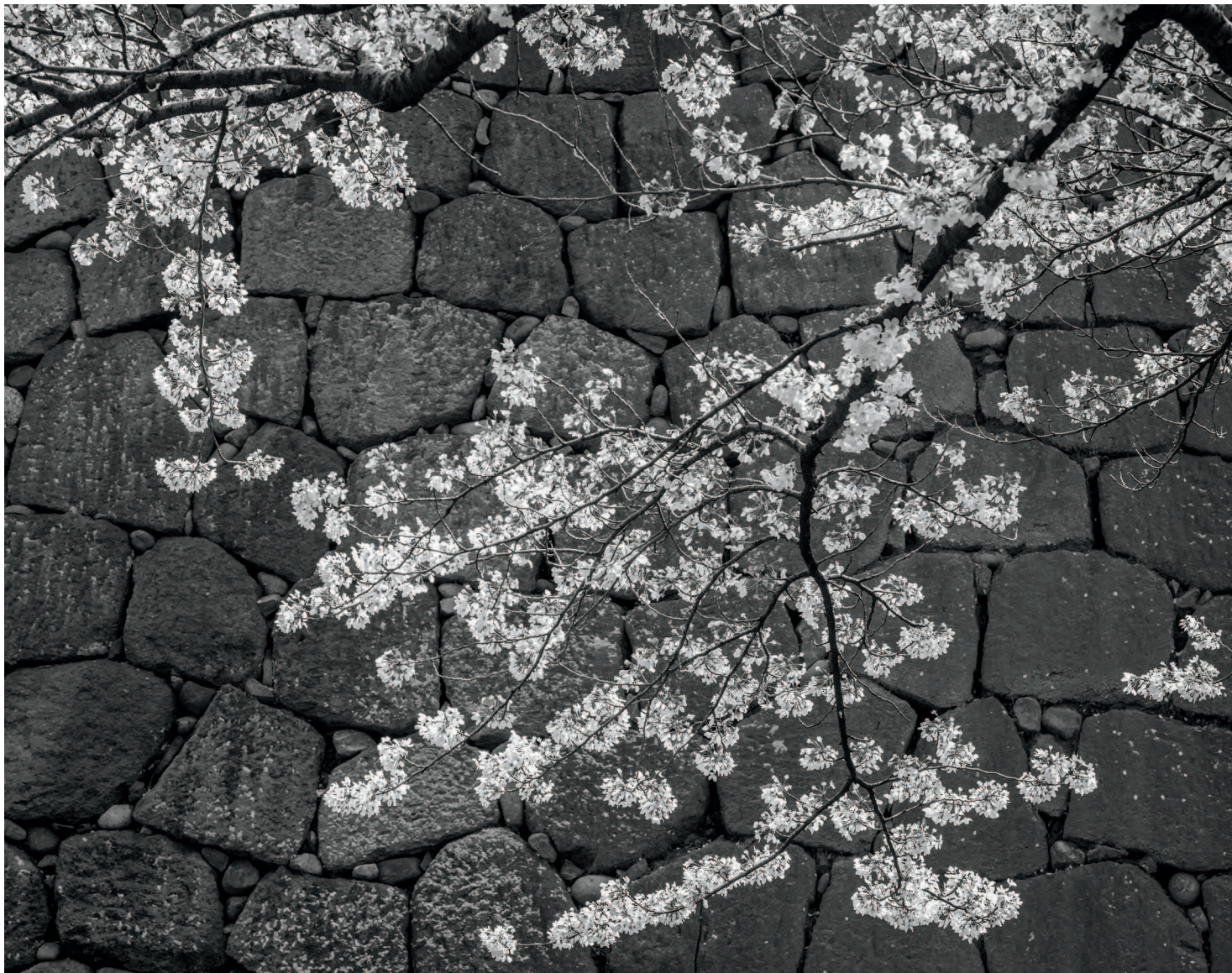
The next leg of my journey took me to Kanazawa, a city on the west coast of Japan. Kanazawa is famous for its arts and crafts, especially lacquer ware and gold leaf. In Kanazawa you can buy ice cream cones topped with sheets of gold leaf. The highlight of Kanazawa is the Kenroku-en Garden, said to be one of the three finest gardens in Japan. Down the hill from the garden is the Kanazawa Castle, where I found still more flowering cherry trees.



Cherry Blossoms No. 5, Kenroku-en Garden, 2016



Cherry Blossoms No. 1, Kanazawa Castle, 2016



Cherry Blossoms No. 3, Kanazawa Castle, 2016

The third leg of my journey took me to Kyoto, the city of temples and shrines. Hundreds of them.

Japan suffers from the consequences of its own success. The authorities have kept their promises to travellers to keep the country clean and safe. They have made extraordinary efforts to make travel easy, even for those who don't speak or read Japanese. The result is that there are tourists everywhere. The crowding is particularly acute at the famous attractions like Kinkaku-ji (the Golden Pavilion), Ryōan-ji (famous Zen Buddhist rock garden), and Fushimi Inari-Taisha (winding tunnels of bright orange *torii*). Extended waits in long lines are common.

The problem is that the entrance fees are so low. The entrance fee to Kinkaku-ji is currently 400 yen (about \$3.60). I would happily pay 4,000 yen for the opportunity to photograph these sites free from crowds and with a tripod. I would be content if they set aside just one day per week for photographers and painters willing to pay high entrance fees in order to create their art in peace.

There are steps one can take to avoid crowds. Don't visit the popular sites during cherry blossom season, as I did. Come in January—expect cool weather and small crowds. Be at the entrance at opening time. Visit the less popular sites. I took the next three photographs at Nanzen-ji and Kumanonyakuōji, which are located on the opposite side of the city from Kinkaku-ji and Ryōan-ji. There are numerous temples and shrines in the neighborhood. I found them beautiful, uncrowded, and tranquil.



Nanzen-ji No. 2, Kyoto, 2016



Nanzen-ji No. 3, Kyoto, 2016



Camellias, Kumanonyakuōji, 2016

At a plant near Kyoto the Suntory Yamazaki Distillery manufactures whiskey. Behind the distillery is a shrine, which by no means compares with large sites like Fushimi Inari-Taisha, but it has one advantage: it is not overrun by sightseers. When I visited it, the shrine was nearly deserted. Taking photographs alone amid the beautiful structures, I was actually able to experience the meditative mood that one associates with Buddhist shrines. (I wonder if the Japanese find modest shrines like this utterly mundane.) When I entered the site, one other photographer was taking pictures; by the time I left, I had the place to myself.



Suntory Shrine No. 1, 2016

The technical problem I faced arose from the fact that our tour of the distillery ended at midday. The brilliant sunshine created spots of glare on the foliage and the roof of the structure in the background coupled with inky black shadows on the base of the structure and at the base of the columns on the left. I could not fix the problem with a single curves adjustment layer. Manipulating the curve in a curves adjustment layer to steepen the curve in the shadows and highlights had the effect of flattening it in the midtones, reducing the midtone contrast. In photography, as elsewhere in life, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

To solve this problem I created two curves adjustment layers, one for the shadows and one for the highlights. I adjusted the curve on the shadow adjustment layer to increase the slope of the curve at the bottom of the curve, in the shadow region. I adjusted the curve on the highlight adjustment layer to increase the slope of the curve at the top of the curve, in the highlight region. I then filled the masks for both adjustment layers with black, so that the adjusted curves did not affect any pixels in the image. Now, with a white brush, I painted contrast into the shadow and highlight regions without reducing the midtone contrast. Painting in contrast in this manner, so as to avoid the midtone areas, is tedious work, but this is as close as we can get to a free lunch.



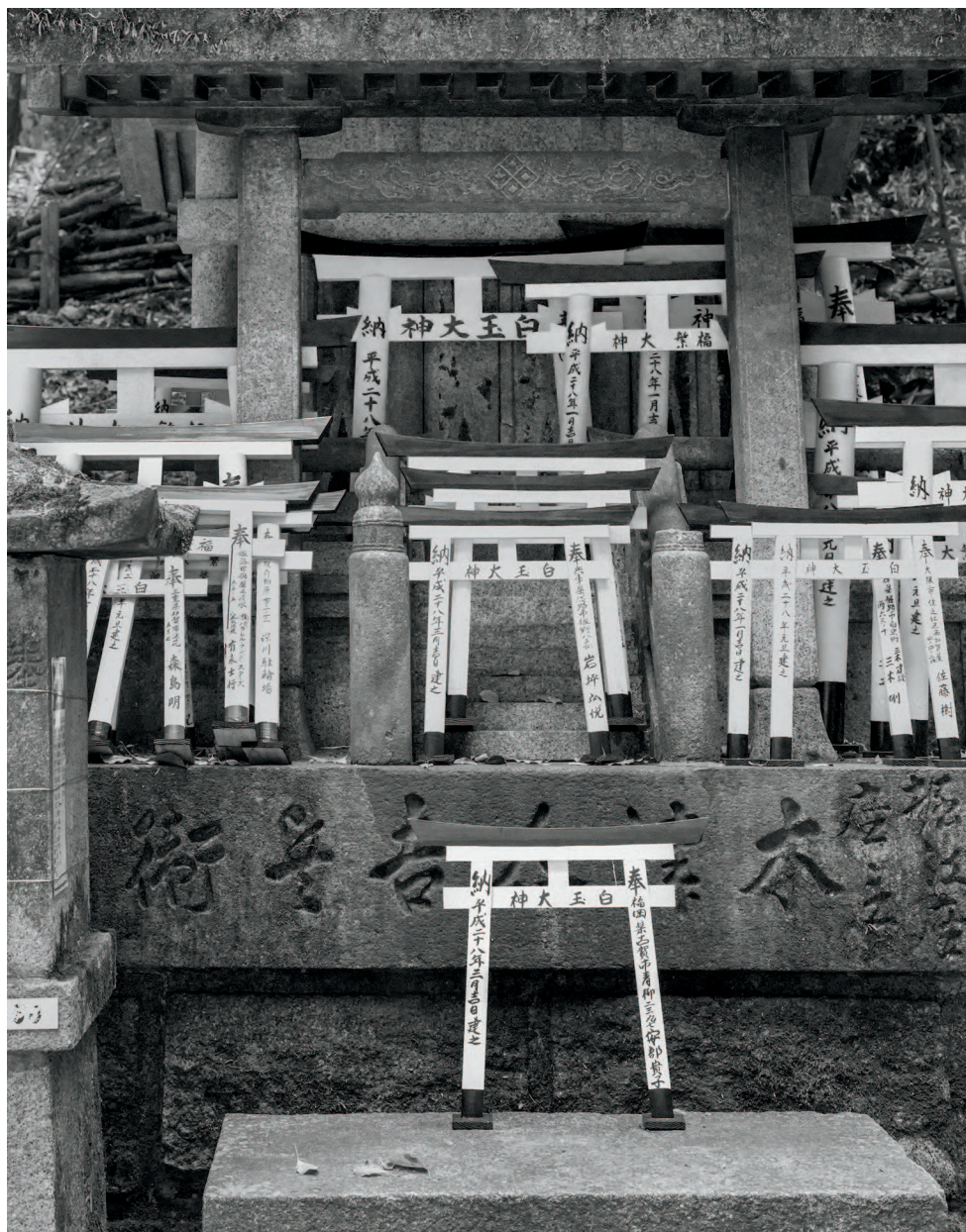
Suntory Shrine No. 2, 2016



Suntory Shrine No. 3, 2016

The next day I took the train to the Fushimi Inari-Taisha shrine and then to Nara. Fushimi Inari-Taisha consists of a series of paths up a hillside through tunnels of *torii* gates. This is one of the popular sites overrun with visitors. I would like to have taken some pictures of the *torii* paths, but I didn't have the patience to wait for a break in the crowds. I did find a collection of miniature *torii* gates, arranged off to the side of the main path.

The *torii* gates were a brilliant orange, which stood out against the background of dark gray stone. In order to convey in black and white the impact of the orange *torii* against the gray stone, I started with a dark rendition of the color image and, in the process of converting to black and white, directed Photoshop to render the color orange much lighter than other colors. The *torii* at the top of the image were shaded by the overhanging roof. I used a curves adjustment layer to lighten them until they approached the *torii* at the bottom of the image in luminosity.



Miniature Torii Gates, Fushimi Inari-Taisha, 2016

The leading attraction in the ancient capital of Nara is the Tōdai-ji, a Buddhist temple of mammoth proportions. Until recently, it was the largest wooden structure in the world. It houses a giant Buddha statue, 49 feet tall. Walking to the Tōdai-ji temple from the Nara train station, one passes through a lovely park, home to the famous Nara deer. The park also includes a scenic waterway and *torii*, before which an egret had paused to feed as I was preparing to photograph the *torii*.



Torii Gate, Nara Park, 2016

When I visited the Kinkaku-ji temple in 1980, I was free to wander the paths that crisscross the garden and to photograph the pavilion from all directions. I could not do so when I returned in 2016 because of the enormous crowds everywhere I turned. I was able, however, to work my way to the front of the crowd and photograph the exquisitely pruned trees in the Mirror Pond.



Island in the Mirror Pond No. 2, Kinkaku-ji, 2016



Island in the Mirror Pond No. 3, Kinkaku-ji, 2016

By the time I visited Kinkaku-ji, the cherry blossoms had mostly given way to tiny, green leaves. I framed some branches of new leaves against the pavilion.



New Leaves, Kinkaku-ji, 2016

By the time I reached the nearby temple of Ryōan-ji, it was nearly noon, and the sun was high in the sky, which did not favor photographing the famous Zen garden with its rock formations floating in a sea of smooth, white pebbles raked into circular and linear patterns. In the shade, however, I found a spot where sunlight filtered through the trees and cast a dappled light on leaves of the undergrowth still bearing the remains of fallen cherry blossoms.



Leaves, Ryōan-ji, 2016

Back in Tokyo, the pedestrians on a long staircase caught my eye: five school children making their way up the stairs and in their midst a gray haired man, their teacher perhaps, and descending the staircase a young monk.



Stairway, Chion-in, 2016

I seldom take candid photographs of passersby. As one of my teachers once said, "I am an introvert. I would rather have a root canal operation than stick a lens in a stranger's face." In Kyoto and Nara, however, I decided to give street photography a try.

I took the Kyoto portraits in the conventional manner, albeit unobtrusively. In the first portrait the woman's face is turned away from the camera and shielded by her hat, but the appearance of the lovingly groomed dogs reveals her personality.



Two Dogs, Kyoto, 2016



Checking Her Email, Kyoto, 2016

In Nara, I tried a different approach. I adjusted the camera to focus automatically on the face of some person in the scene. Instead of holding the camera up to my face to frame the picture in the viewfinder, I held the camera at my chest and pointed it in the general direction of the person I wanted to photograph. I set the shutter to a quiet mode in order to avoid attracting attention to the loud shutter click familiar with DSLR cameras.

I took numerous photographs, but only two of them turned out. In the cases of the numerous discarded images I either failed to achieve focus on my intended subject or I failed to point the camera in the right direction or to hold the camera level. Had I conducted this experiment with a film camera, it would have turned into an expensive disappointment, but with digital images I could delete the flawed exposures and proceed on my merry way with the two that worked.



A Photographer, Nara, 2016



Field Trip to Nara, 2016

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About This Portfolio

I took the photographs in this portfolio on a trip to Japan in 2016. I used a Nikon D800E camera, chosen because of the high resolution of the sensor. I used 50mm *f*/1.8 and 85mm *f*/1.8 prime lenses. I processed the photographs in Adobe Photoshop using the Nik Collection of plug-ins, in particular Silver Efex Pro 2. I composed the text in this book in Optima using Adobe InDesign.

You can find many of these photographs, along with dozens of photographs of other beautiful places, on the website at nigrumetalbum.com. If you would like to track my photographic activities, you may follow me on Twitter (twitter.com/sashleyphotos) or on Instagram (instagram.com/sashleyphotos). You can reach me by email at stephen.ashley@strattonpress.com.

This portfolio and many other photographs are available for purchase on the website, nigrumetalbum.com, and on Etsy at nigrumetalbum.etsy.com. Printed versions of my photography books are available at www.blurb.com/user/store/sashley; pdf versions of the same books are available for free at nigrumetalbum.com/books.

About the Photographer

When I was a young teenager, my parents rented a house with a bomb shelter in the basement. I discovered that when I turned off the lights, the bomb shelter was perfectly black, and I realized that it would make an ideal darkroom. I assembled one, using a Kodak slide projector as an enlarger. The light from the projector burned so brightly that it solarized the enlarging paper. Thus began my photographic avocation.

During my career I engaged in many occupations—fire fighter, typesetter, lawyer, writer, publisher, law professor, software developer, flight instructor—but all the while I honed my photographic skills. After a serious illness forced me to give up my law-related work, my retirement gave me the opportunity to devote my time to expanding my portfolio and to finding an audience for my photographs.

I had no formal education in photography but learned from many teachers. My primary mentor was my uncle, Roy Stratton, who freely shared with me his deep knowledge of photography. In the 1970s and 1980s the University of California Extension programs at Berkeley and Santa Cruz offered a wide selection of short courses on various aspects of photography, and I enrolled in several. These courses gave me the opportunity to meet and learn from Stuart Scofield, Mark Citret, and others. I also had the good fortune to attend a Friends of Photography program, where I met Ruth Bernhard, Morley Baer, John Sexton, Marilyn Bridges, and William Christenberry. More recently, in 2014, 2015, and 2016, I travelled to Moab, Utah, to attend the Moab Photography Symposium, where I had an opportunity to photograph with Judith Zimmerman, Colleen Miniuk-Sperry, Bruce Hucko, and Guy Tal.

During a trip to Japan, Stephen S. Ashley photographed cherry blossoms, palace walls, temples, shrines, *torii* gates, reflecting pools, and portraits. And more cherry blossoms. This book contains 30 photographs that he took on his visit to the land of the rising sun.

This book was created to accompany a portfolio containing these 30 images. The images are organized in roughly chronological order, from Tokyo to Kanazawa to Kyoto and back.

In these pages Ashley shares the experience of taking these photographs and provides a brief account of the making of each of these photographs, including descriptions of the techniques used to take and process them.

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