Mid course:
Instead of a travelogue, a vicissitude.
Saturday we leave chilly Kyoto for the snowy South & West.

Warm at last in a toasty restaurant after a morning taking pictures in bright sun, but gusty wind and bitter cold, with our new digital camera, I reviewed the results. Every shot was there, but the memory stick was chock full. Wondering how to gain space, I clicked through the labyrinth of options. Maybe this FORMAT would do it, at least give the images definitive form.
The screen turned blue with white letters, FORMATTING. When it stopped, I went to SLIDE SHOW to let Gail and our guide, Masa, see what had caught my eye while I was peering through garden gates, sizing up dramatically and drastically pruned trees, and zooming in at the grotesque masks of roof peaks or down to sparkling water from dragon spouts, or mosses, ferns, and stones. Nothing happened. I noticed that the outline of the stick on the screen was empty. Suddenly it dawned. “FORMAT” here must mean what it does on a personal computer, i.e. wipe disk clean, even though the camera’s memory is a thin plastic rectangle not a disk. So this is what happened, also, to yesterday’s takes of Mt. Fuji. The most famous scene in Japan had suddenly presented itself to us whisking by on the Shinkansen train from Tokyo down to Nagoya. At first I had left the camera alone, deterred by the haze and the risk of making a mediocre replica of a cliche. I wasn’t going to act like a Japanese tourist in New York.
But then a red and white striped smokestack loomed, bisected the tranquil, white-topped cone, and belched a great puff of white steam. I couldn’t resist. The worst of modern industrial pollution against the emblem of tradition: virtual eruption, ideocological pun. Out came the camera. The first stack was long gone but a host of others obliged and the takes looked pretty good on review. But then I felt that urge to compress, to get more space for Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial hotel, for the old steam engine, the Miehle flatbed press like the one in my father’s shop, and other relics of Japan’s first opening to the West—all reassembled at the open-air museum of Meijimura. I formatted. I couldn’t figure out what happened to my virtual Fuji when I downloaded that evening in Nara.
Today the impulse to format came at the end of a long morning among the temples West of Nara. Power was running low and the 64 MG stick was nearly full. I had pushed the camera to the limits. Along our way back from the furthest temple, which was a bit of a disappointment in itself, I noticed a tree, one of those with trunk and branches that look naked, highlighted by the sun, thrusting up dark twigs against the blue sky, like arms reaching up with fingers outstretched.
Then, to the right of the path, among stone lanterns, was a huge, gnarled and
twisted trunk, with one branch reaching a bit skyward, a broken end emerging from
cluster of leaves. I had to get that gesture, like some transformed monster from
Ovidian myth. Then I saw that the trunk from the other side was hollowed out,
with sunlight filtering in, and twisted into strange shapes. On another angle, the
bark ran in crumpled vertical strata, like sediments thrown upwards by some great
geological cataclysm. I was so cold and the camera had so little power that I just
kept pointing and shooting, even tried the flash to get the texture and twists inside
the bole. It was a great metamorphic monument. When I tried a review, I saw that I
had it.
Before that I had focused on the trees at the corners of a temple courtyard. One was
overgrown with green lichen and little ferns on the branches. The twigs bore
swelling pink buds. At the other corner was a tree with branches overgrown by
white scales of lichen.
But before ever getting into that courtyard I had fixed on the dragon fountain head,
got the water sparkling in the sun, also pilgrims doing their ritual washing in spite
of the cold, one a little plump woman in eye-glasses who didn’t seem to mind the
gelid water as she sprinkled and rubbed. And the first thing that caught my eye in
the whole place was the particularly fierce guardian spirit on the roof-peak of a
monk’s house.
Oh yes, and in the last shrine, two girls had commissioned a monk to inscribe a
sewn blank book for them and he was making elegant calligraphy, using a small
brush. I captured a whole series of his hands, the brush, and the characters taking
form down the page from his deft strokes. It was the scene I had observed at our
house last evening, when our host sat at his low desk after dinner and painted on a
long paper strip.
But even before going out, I worked in the house entry at getting a massive, hewn
beam, which is faceted with long planes and bends in a gentle curve. Out in front,
too, I caught the morning sunlight on the thatch over the entry building.
Thinking back I remember how struck I was, too, at one of the temples, by the gray
boulders set in low, rounded beads of azaleas with reddish leaves. But even before
leaving breakfast, I made high-resolution shots of the fisherman on the painted
screen in the matted room next to where we dined. Our host had slid open the outer
panels to give me better light. Also at breakfast, I had noticed the colorful patterns
of the clamshells from the soup. I arranged them in a Japanese design on the
rectangular plate that had brought the grilled bream, much to the amusement of
our hostess when I carried it out to the kitchen.
I searched the manual in vain. No UNFORMAT. So I sat down to write this. Our
host came early to call us to our last dinner. There was a handsome ceramic
nabemono pot seething on the gas burner at center table. With chopsticks he began lifting mushrooms, greens, and pieces of fish into the broth. His wife had warmed the last of our sake and I offered him my cup. He went to the cupboard to get a third for me and we toasted, kampai. But then he went to the kitchen and brought back a bottle wrapped in elegantly inscribed paper. He shook it vigorously and poured a white-cloudy liquid into our glasses. It tasted a bit frizzy. We alternated with the clear sake. At the end, on his cell-phone he called his English speaking friend, as he had several times during our stay, and she explained that the cloudy liquid was special sake, made by the monks at the great Todaiji shrine, given our host in return for the special rice cake he brings as a New Year’s offering.

As we rose, he offered to let us take the bottle. I declined. But we did manage to let him know that we would like to see him write again as he had the evening before. With alacrity he got out his slate inkstand, poured water from a small flask, and began grinding an inkstick into the liquid. With his brush he made test strokes on scrap paper, then produced a long, elegant sheet and began to paint. First he did my name in flowing strokes, then a message in Japanese. I remembered the camera’s capacity to take movies and recorded the quick strokes. He brought out a red ink pad and small seal for the final touch.

Carefully he folded and placed the document in an envelope, wrote my name on it and proceeded to make another whole document for Gail. Now he reached under the table for a stack of blue and red albums and leafed through them for postage stamps, not that these letters would ever be mailed. For her he chose women garbed in elaborate kimonos, for me one classic kimono and, with a grin humming the Star-Spangled Banner, an American flag. Better than the monk in the temple and all the lost pictures. We thanked him with a reciprocal mingling of Japanese bows and American hugs.