

ABANDONING A CAT

Memories of my father.

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI



Of course I have a lot of memories of my father. It's only natural, considering that we lived under the same roof of our not exactly spacious home from the time I was born until I left home at eighteen. And, as is the case with most children and parents, I imagine, some of my memories of my father are happy, some not quite so much. But the memories that remain most vividly in my mind now fall into neither category; they involve more ordinary events.

This one, for instance:

When we were living in Shukugawa (part of Nishinomiya City, in Hyogo Prefecture), one day we went to the beach to get rid of a cat. Not a kitten but an

older female cat. Why we needed to get rid of it I can't recall. The house we lived in was a single-family home with a garden and plenty of room for a cat. Maybe it was a stray we'd taken in that was now pregnant, and my parents felt they couldn't care for it anymore. My memory isn't clear on this point. Getting rid of cats back then was a common occurrence, not something that anyone would criticize you for. The idea of neutering cats never crossed anyone's mind. I was in one of the lower grades in elementary school at the time, I believe, so it was probably around 1955, or a little later. Near our home were the ruins of a bank building that had been bombed

by American planes—one of a few still visible scars of the war.

My father and I set off that summer afternoon to leave the cat by the shore. He pedalled his bicycle, while I sat on the back holding a box with the cat inside. We rode along the Shukugawa River, arrived at the beach at Koroen, set the box down among some trees there, and, without a backward glance, headed home. The beach must have been about two kilometres from our house.

At home, we got off the bike—discussing how we felt sorry for the cat, but what could we do?—and when we opened the front door the cat we'd just abandoned was there, greeting us with a friendly meow, its tail standing tall. It had beaten us home. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how it had done that. We'd been on a bike, after all. My father was stumped as well. The two of us stood there for a while, at a total loss for words. Slowly, my father's look of blank amazement changed to one of admiration and, finally, to an expression of relief. And the cat went back to being our pet.

We always had cats at home, and we liked them. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and cats and books were my best friends when I was growing up. I loved to sit on the veranda with a cat, sunning myself. So why did we have to take that cat to the beach and abandon it? Why didn't I protest? These questions—along with that of how the cat beat us home—are still unanswered.

Another memory of my father is this: Every morning, before breakfast, he would sit for a long time in front of the *butsudan* shrine in our home, intently reciting Buddhist sutras, with his eyes closed. It wasn't a regular Buddhist shrine, exactly, but a small cylindrical glass case with a beautifully carved bodhisattva statue inside. Why did my father recite sutras every morning in front of that glass case, instead of in front of a standard *butsudan*? That's one more on my list of unanswered questions.

At any rate, this was obviously an important ritual for him, one that marked the start of each day. As far as I know, he never failed to perform what he called his "duty," and no one was allowed to interfere with it. There was an intense focus about the whole act. Sim-

The author in his garden in Shukugawa, Nishinomiya, in September, 1957.

ply labelling it “a daily habit” doesn’t do it justice.

Once, when I was a child, I asked him whom he was praying for. And he replied that it was for those who had died in the war. His fellow Japanese soldiers who’d died, as well as the Chinese who’d been their enemy. He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t press him. I suspect that if I had he would have opened up more. But I didn’t. There must have been something in me that prevented me from pursuing the topic.

I should explain a little about my father’s background. His father, Ben-shiki Murakami, was born into a farming family in Aichi Prefecture. As was common with younger sons, my grandfather was sent to a nearby temple to train as a priest. He was a decent student, and after apprenticeships at various temples he was appointed head priest of the Anyoji Temple, in Kyoto. This temple has four or five hundred families in its parish, so it was quite a promotion for him.

I grew up in the Osaka-Kobe area, so I didn’t have many opportunities to visit my grandfather’s home, this Kyoto temple, and I have few memories of him. What I understand, though, is that he was a free, uninhibited sort of person, known for his love of drinking. As his name implies—the character *ben* in his first name means “eloquence”—he had a way with words; he was a capable priest, and was apparently popular. I do recall that he was charismatic, with a booming voice.

My grandfather had six sons (not a single daughter) and was a healthy, hearty man, but, sadly, when he was seventy, at eight-fifty on the morning of August 25, 1958, he was struck by a train while crossing the tracks of the Keishin Line, which connects Kyoto (Misasagi) and Otsu, and killed. It was an unattended railway crossing in Yamada-cho, Kitahanayama, Yamashina, in Higashiyama-ku. A large typhoon hit the Kinki region on this particular day; it was raining hard, my grandfather was carrying an umbrella, and he probably didn’t see the train coming around a curve. He was a bit hard of hearing as well.

The night our family learned that my grandfather had died, I remember my father quickly preparing to go to

Kyoto, and my mother crying, clinging to him, pleading, “Whatever you do, don’t agree to take over the temple.” I was only nine at the time, but this image is etched in my brain, like a memorable scene from a black-and-white movie. My father was expressionless, silently nodding. I think he’d already made up his mind. I could sense it.

My father was born on December 1, 1917, in Awata-guchi, Sakyo-ku, in Kyoto. When he was a boy, the peaceful Taisho democracy period was drawing to a close, to be followed by the gloomy Great Depression, then the swamp that was the Second Sino-Japanese War, and, finally, the tragedy of the Second World War. Then came the confusion and poverty of the early postwar period, when my father’s generation struggled to survive. As I mentioned, my father was one of six brothers. Three of them had been drafted and fought in the Second Sino-Japanese War and, miraculously, survived with no serious injuries. Almost all of the six sons were more or less qualified to be priests. They had that kind of education. My father, for instance, held a junior rank as a priest, roughly equivalent to that of a second lieutenant in the military. In the summer, during the busy *obon* season—the yearly festival to honor family ancestors—these six brothers would assemble in Kyoto and divide up the visits to the temple’s parishioners. At night, they’d get together and drink.

After my grandfather died, there was the pressing question of who would take over the priestly duties at the temple. Most of the sons were already married and had jobs. Truth be told, no one had expected my grandfather to pass away so early or so suddenly.

The eldest son—my uncle Shimei Murakami—had wanted to become a veterinarian, but after the war he took a job at the tax office in Osaka and was now a subsection chief, while my father, the second son, taught Japanese at the combined Koyo Gakuin junior and senior high school in the Kansai area. The other brothers were either teachers, too, or studying in Buddhist-affiliated colleges. Two of the brothers had been adopted by other families, a common practice, and had different last names. At any rate, when they met to

discuss the situation no one volunteered to take on the temple duties. Becoming the head priest of a large temple like that was no easy undertaking, and would be a major burden for anyone’s family. The brothers knew this all too well. And my grandmother, a widow now, was a strict, no-nonsense type; any wife would have found it difficult to serve as the head priest’s spouse with her still there. My mother was the eldest daughter of an established merchant family in Senba, in Osaka. She was a fashionable woman, not at all the type to fit in as the head priest’s wife in Kyoto. So it was no wonder she clung to my father, in tears, begging him not to take over the temple.

At least from my perspective, as his son, my father seemed to be a straightforward, responsible person. He hadn’t inherited his father’s openhearted disposition (he was more the nervous type), but his good-natured manner and his way of speaking put other people at ease. He had a sincere faith as well. He probably would have made a good priest, and I think he knew that. My guess is that if he’d been single he wouldn’t have resisted the idea very much. But he had something he couldn’t compromise on—his own little family.

In the end, my uncle Shimei left his job at the tax office and succeeded my grandfather as the head priest of Anyoji Temple. And, later, he was succeeded by his son, my cousin Junichi. According to Junichi, Shimei agreed to become the head priest out of a sense of obligation as the eldest son. I say he agreed, but it was more that he had no choice. Back then, the parishioners were much more influential than they are now, and they probably wouldn’t have let him off the hook.

When my father was a boy, he was sent to be an apprentice at a temple somewhere in Nara. The understanding, presumably, was that he would be adopted into the Nara priest’s family. However, after his apprenticeship he returned home to Kyoto. This was ostensibly because the cold had adversely affected his health, but the main reason seems to have been that he couldn’t adjust to the new environment. After returning home, he lived, as before, as his parents’ son. But I get the

feeling that the experience remained with him, as a deep emotional scar. I can't point to any particular evidence of this, but there was something about him that made me feel that way.

I recall now the expression on my father's face—surprised at first, then impressed, then relieved—when that cat we had supposedly abandoned beat us home.

I've never experienced anything like that. I was brought up—fairly lovingly, I'd say—as the only child in an ordinary family. So I can't understand, on a practical or an emotional level, what kind of psychic scars may result when a child is abandoned by his parents. I can only imagine it on a superficial level.

The French director François Truffaut talked about being forced to live apart from his parents when he was young. And for the rest of his life he pursued this theme of abandonment in his films. Most people probably have some depressing experience they can't quite put into words but also can't forget.

My father graduated from Higashiyama Junior High School (equivalent to a high school today) in 1936 and entered the School for Seizan Studies at eighteen. Students generally received a four-year exemption from military ser-

vice, but he forgot to take care of some administrative paperwork, and in 1938, when he was twenty, he was drafted. It was a procedural error, but once that kind of mistake is made you can't just apologize your way out of it. Bureaucracies and the military are like that. Protocol has to be followed.

My father belonged to the 20th Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 16th Division (Fushimi Division). The nucleus of the 16th Division then consisted of four infantry regiments: the 9th Infantry Regiment (Kyoto), the 20th Infantry Regiment (Fukuchiyama), the 33rd Infantry Regiment (Tsu City, in Mie Prefecture), and the 38th Infantry Regiment (Nara). It's unclear why my father, who was from Kyoto City proper, was assigned not to the local 9th Regiment but instead to the far-off Fukuchiyama Regiment.

At least this was how I understood it for the longest time, but when I looked more deeply into his background I found that I was wrong. In fact, my father belonged not to the 20th Infantry Regiment but to the 16th Transport Regiment, which was also part of the 16th Division. And this regiment wasn't in

Fukuchiyama but was headquartered in Fukakusa/Fushimi, in Kyoto City. So why was I under the impression that my father had belonged to the 20th Infantry Regiment? I'll discuss this point later.

The 20th Infantry Regiment was known for being one of the first to arrive in Nanjing after the city fell. Military units from Kyoto were generally seen as well bred and urbane, but this particular regiment's actions gave it a surprisingly bloody reputation. For a long time, I was afraid that my father had participated in the attack on Nanjing, and I was reluctant to investigate the details. He died, in August, 2008, at the age of ninety, without my ever having asked him about it, without his ever having talked about it.

My father was drafted in August of 1938. The 20th Infantry Regiment's infamous march into Nanjing took place the previous year, in December of 1937, so my father had missed it by nearly a year. When I learned this, it was a tremendous relief, as if a great weight had been lifted.

As a private second class in the 16th Transport Regiment, my father boarded a troop transport in Ujina Harbor on October 3, 1938, and arrived in Shanghai on October 6th. There his regiment joined up with the 20th Infantry Regiment. According to the Army's wartime directory, the 16th Transport Regiment was primarily assigned to supply and security duties. If you follow the regiment's movements, you see that it covered incredible distances for the time. For units that were barely motorized, and lacked sufficient fuel—horses were the main mode of transportation—travelling so far must have been extremely arduous. The situation at the front was dire: supplies couldn't get there; there was a chronic shortage of rations and ammunition; the men's uniforms were in tatters; and unsanitary conditions led to outbreaks of cholera and other infectious diseases. It was impossible for Japan, with its limited strength, to control a huge country like China. Even though the Japanese Army was able to gain military control of one city after another, it was, practically speaking, incapable of occupying entire regions. The memoirs written by soldiers in the 20th Infantry Regiment give a clear picture of how pitiful the



"All right, back to answering e-mails and sighing."

situation was. Transport troops were not usually directly involved in front-line fighting, but that didn't mean they were safe. As they were only lightly armed (usually with just bayonets), when the enemy attacked from the rear they suffered major casualties.

Soon after starting at the Seizan school, my father had discovered the pleasures of haiku and joined a haiku circle. He was really *into it*, to use a modern idiom. Several of the haiku he wrote while he was a soldier were published in the school's haiku journal; most likely he mailed them to the school from the front:

Birds migrating
Ah—where they are headed
must be my homeland

A soldier, yet a priest
clasping my hands in prayer
toward the moon

I'm no haiku expert, so it's beyond me to say how accomplished his were. Clearly, what holds these poems together is not technique but the open, honest feelings that underscore them.

My father had been studying, no doubt conscientiously, to become a priest. But a simple clerical error had turned him into a soldier. He went through brutal basic training, was handed a Type 38 rifle, placed on a troop-transport ship, and sent off to the fearsome battles at the front. His unit was constantly on the move, clashing with Chinese troops and guerrillas who put up a fierce resistance. In every way imaginable, this was the opposite of life in a peaceful temple in the Kyoto hills. He must have suffered tremendous mental confusion and spiritual turmoil. In the midst of all that, writing haiku may have been his sole consolation. Things he never could have written in his letters, or they wouldn't have made it past the censors, he put into the form of haiku—expressing himself in a symbolic code, as it were—where he was able to honestly bare his true feelings.

My father talked to me about the war only once, when he told me a story about how his unit had executed a captured Chinese soldier. I don't know what prompted him to tell me this. It happened so long ago that it's an iso-



"It's not you, it's the humidity."

lated memory, the context unclear. I was still in the lower grades in elementary school. He related matter-of-factly how the execution had taken place. Though the Chinese soldier knew that he was going to be killed, he didn't struggle, didn't show any fear, but just sat there quietly with his eyes closed. And he was decapitated. The man's attitude was exemplary, my father told me. He seemed to have deep feelings of respect for the Chinese soldier. I don't know if he had to watch as other soldiers in his unit carried out the execution, or if he himself was forced to play a direct role. There's no way now to determine whether this is because my memory is hazy, or whether my father described the incident in intentionally vague terms. But one thing is clear: the experience left feelings of anguish and torment that lingered for a long time in the soul of this priest turned soldier.

At the time, it wasn't at all uncommon to allow new soldiers and recruits to practice killing by executing captured Chinese soldiers. Killing unarmed prisoners was, of course, a violation of international law, but the Japanese military in that period seemed to take the practice for granted. Military units likely didn't have the resources to take care of prisoners. Most of these executions were performed either by shooting the prisoner or by stabbing him with a bayo-

net, but I recall my father telling me that for this particular execution a sword was used.

Needless to say, my father's recounting of this cold-blooded beheading of a man with a sword became deeply etched in my young mind. To put it another way, this heavy weight my father carried—a trauma, in today's terminology—was handed down, in part, to me, his son. That's how human connections work, how history works. It was an act of transference and ritual. My father hardly said a word about his wartime experiences. It's unlikely that he wanted to remember this execution or to talk about it. Yet he must have felt a compelling need to relate the story to his son, his own flesh and blood, even if this meant that it would remain an open wound for both of us.

The 20th Infantry Regiment, along with my father's unit, returned to Japan on August 20, 1939. After a year as a soldier, my father resumed his studies at the Seizan school. At the time, the draft meant two years of military service, but for some reason my father served only one. Perhaps the military took into account the fact that he had been enrolled as a student when he was drafted.

After his service, my father continued to enthusiastically write haiku. This one, written in October of 1940, was



*"Goodnight Twitter. Goodnight Instagram.
Goodnight Snapchat. Goodnight Reddit. Goodnight Tinder.
Goodnight Pinterest. Goodnight Facebook..."*

probably inspired by a good-will visit by the Hitler Youth to Japan:

They call out, singing
to bring the deer closer,
the Hitler Youth

Personally, I really like this haiku, which captures an obscure moment in history in a subtle, unusual way. There's a striking contrast between the far-off bloody conflict in Europe and the deer (probably the famous deer in Nara). Those Hitler Youth, enjoying a short visit to Japan, may very well have gone on to perish in the bitter winters at the Eastern Front.

I'm drawn to this poem as well:

Anniversary
of Issa's death, I sit here
with his sad poems

The world depicted is so calm and tranquil, yet there's a lingering sense of chaos.

My father always loved literature and, after he became a teacher, spent much of his time reading. Our house was full of books. This may have in-

fluenced me in my teens, when I developed a passion for reading myself. My father graduated with honors from the Seizan school, and, in March, 1941, he entered the literature department at Kyoto Imperial University. It can't have been easy to pass the entrance exam for a top school like Kyoto Imperial University after undergoing a Buddhist education to be a priest. My mother often told me, "Your father's very bright." How bright he really was I have no idea. Frankly, it's not a question that interests me much. For somebody in my line of work, intelligence is less important than a sharp intuition. Be that as it may, the fact remains that my father always had excellent grades in school.

Compared with him, I never had much interest in studying; my grades were lacklustre from start to finish. I'm the type who eagerly pursues things I'm interested in but can't be bothered with anything else. That was true of me when I was a student, and it is still true now.

This disappointed my father, who

I'm sure compared me to himself at the same age. You were born in this peaceful time, he must have thought. You can study as much as you like, with nothing to get in the way. So why can't you make more of an effort? I think he wanted me to follow the path he hadn't been able to take because of the war.

But I couldn't live up to my father's expectations. I never could will myself to study the way he wanted me to. I found most classes at school mind-numbing, the school system overly uniform and repressive. This led my father to feel a chronic dismay, and me to feel a chronic distress (and a certain amount of unconscious anger). When I debuted as a novelist, at thirty, my father was really pleased, but by that time our relationship had grown distant and cool.

Even now I carry around with me the feeling—or perhaps the dregs of the feeling—that I disappointed my father, let him down. Back in my teens, this made things uncomfortable at home, with a constant undercurrent of guilt on my part. I still have nightmares in which I have to take a test at school and can't answer a single question. Time ticks away as I do nothing, though I'm well aware that failing the test will have major consequences—that sort of dream. I usually wake up in a cold sweat.

But, back then, being glued to my desk, finishing homework, and getting better grades on tests held far less appeal than reading books I enjoyed, listening to music I liked, playing sports or mah-jongg with friends, and going on dates with girls.

All we can do is breathe the air of the period we live in, carry with us the special burdens of the time, and grow up within those confines. That's just how things are.

My father graduated from the School for Seizan Studies in the spring of 1941, and at the end of September received a special draft notice. On October 3rd, he was back in uniform, first in the 20th Infantry Regiment (Fukuchiyama), and then in the 53rd Transport Regiment, which was part of the 53rd Division.

In 1940, the 16th Division had been permanently stationed in Manchuria, and while it was there the 53rd Division

in Kyoto was organized to take its place. Most likely, the confusion of this sudden reorganization accounts for why my father was initially placed in the Fukuchiyama Regiment. (As I said, I was always mistakenly convinced that he'd been in the Fukuchiyama Regiment from the first time he was drafted.) The 53rd Division was sent to Burma in 1944, was in the Battle of Imphal, and, from December to March, 1945, was nearly decimated by the British in the Battle of the Irrawaddy River.

But quite unexpectedly, on November 30, 1941, my father was released from military service and allowed to return to civilian life. November 30th was eight days before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After that attack, I doubt that the military would have been generous enough to let him go.

As my father told it, his life was saved by one officer. My father was a pfc. at the time and was summoned by a senior officer, who told him, "You're studying at Kyoto Imperial University, and would better serve the country by continuing your studies than by being a soldier." Did one officer have the authority to make this decision? I have no idea. It's hard to conceive that a humanities student such as my father could be seen as somehow serving the country by returning to college and his study of haiku. There had to be other factors at work. Either way, he was released from the Army and was a free man again.

At least that was the story I heard, or have a memory of hearing, as a child. Unfortunately, it doesn't accord with the facts. Kyoto Imperial University records indicate that my father enrolled in the literature department in October, 1944. Perhaps my memory is cloudy. Or maybe it was my mother who told me this story, and her memory was faulty. And now there's no way to verify what's true and what isn't.

According to the records, my father entered the literature department of Kyoto Imperial University in October, 1944, and graduated in September, 1947. But I have no idea where he was, or what he was doing, between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-six, the three years after he was released from the military and before he entered Kyoto Imperial University.

Right after my father was released

from service, the Second World War broke out in the Pacific. In the course of the war, the 16th Division and the 53rd Division were essentially wiped out. If my father had not been released, if he'd been shipped off with one of his former units, he would almost certainly have died on the battlefield, and then, of course, I wouldn't be alive now. You could call it fortunate, but having his own life saved while his former comrades lost theirs became a source of great pain and anguish. I understand all the more now why he closed his eyes and devoutly recited the sutras every morning of his life.

On June 12, 1945, after he had entered Kyoto Imperial University, my father received his third draft notice. This time he was assigned to the Chubu 143 Corps as a pfc. It's unclear where the corps was stationed, but it stayed within Japan. Two months later, on August 15th, the war ended, and on October 28th my father was released from service and returned to the university. He was twenty-seven.

In September, 1947, my father passed the exams to receive his B.A. and went on to the graduate program in literature at Kyoto Imperial University. I was born in January, 1949. Because of his age, and the fact that he was married and had a child, my father had to give up his studies before completing the program. In order to make a living, he took a position as a Japanese teacher at Koyo Gakuin, in Nishinomiya. I don't know the details of how my father and mother came to be married. Since they lived far apart—one in Kyoto, the other in Osaka—most likely a mutual acquaintance had introduced them. My mother had intended to marry another man, a music teacher, but he died in the war. And the store that her father had owned, in Senba, Osaka, burned down in a U.S. bombing raid. She always remembered Grumman carrier-based fighters strafing the city, and fleeing for her life through the streets of Osaka. The war had a profound effect on my mother's life as well.

My mother, who is now ninety-six, was also a Japanese teacher. After graduating from the literature department of Shoin Women's School, in Osaka, she worked as a teacher at her

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alma mater, but she left her job when she got married.

According to my mother, my father in his younger days lived a pretty wild life. His wartime experiences were fresh then, and his frustration at the fact that his life hadn't gone the way he'd wanted it to made things hard at times. He drank a lot, and occasionally hit his students. But by the time I was growing up he'd mellowed significantly. He'd get depressed and out of sorts sometimes, and drink too much (something my mother often complained about), but I don't recall any unpleasant experiences in our home.

Objectively speaking, I think my father was an excellent teacher. When he died, I was surprised at how many of his former students came to pay their respects. They seemed to have a great deal of affection for him. Many of them had become doctors, and they took very good care of him as he battled cancer and diabetes.

My mother was apparently an outstanding teacher in her own right, and even after she had me and became a full-time housewife many of her former pupils would stop by the house. For some reason, though, I never felt that I was cut out to be a teacher.

As I grew up and formed my own personality, the psychological discord between me and my father became more obvious. Both of us were unbending, and, when it came to not expressing our thoughts directly, we were two of a kind. For better or for worse.

After I got married and started working, my father and I grew even more estranged. And when I became a full-time writer our relationship got so convoluted that in the end we cut off nearly all contact. We didn't see each other for more than twenty years, and spoke only when it was absolutely necessary.

My father and I were born into different ages and environments, and our ways of thinking and viewing the world were miles apart. If at a certain point I'd attempted to rebuild our relationship, things might have gone in another direction, but I was too focussed on what I wanted to do to make the effort.

My father and I finally talked face to face shortly before he died. I was almost sixty, my father ninety. He was in

a hospital in Nishijin, in Kyoto. He had terrible diabetes, and cancer was ravaging much of his body. Though he'd always been on the stout side, now he was gaunt. I barely recognized him. And there, in the final days of his life—the very final few days—my father and I managed an awkward conversation and reached a sort of reconciliation. Despite our differences, looking at my emaciated father I did feel a connection, a bond between us.

Even now, I can relive the shared puzzlement of that summer day when we rode together on his bike to the beach at Koroen to abandon a striped cat, a cat that totally got the better of us. I can recall the sound of the waves, the scent of the wind whistling through the stand of pines. It's the accumulation of insignificant things like this that has made me the person I am.

I have one more memory from childhood that involves a cat. I included this episode in one of my novels but would like to touch on it again here, as something that actually happened.

We had a little white kitten. I don't recall how we came to have it, because back then we always had cats coming and going in our home. But I do recall how pretty this kitten's fur was, how cute it was.

One evening, as I sat on the porch, this cat suddenly raced straight up into the tall, beautiful pine tree in our garden. Almost as if it wanted to show off to me how brave and agile it was. I couldn't believe how nimbly it scampered up the trunk and disappeared into the upper branches. After a while, the kitten started to meow pitifully, as though it were begging for help. It had had no trouble climbing up so high, but it seemed terrified of climbing back down.

I stood at the base of the tree looking up, but couldn't see the cat. I could only hear its faint cry. I went to get my father and told him what had happened, hoping that he could figure out a way to rescue the kitten. But there was nothing he could do; it was too high up for a ladder to be of any use. The kitten kept meowing for help, as the sun began to set. Darkness finally enveloped the pine tree.

I don't know what happened to that little kitten. The next morning when I

got up, I couldn't hear it crying anymore. I stood at the base of the tree and called out the kitten's name, but there was no reply. Just silence.

Perhaps the cat had made it down sometime during the night and gone off somewhere (but where?). Or maybe, unable to climb down, it had clung to the branches, exhausted, and grown weaker and weaker until it died. I sat there on the porch, gazing up at the tree, with these scenarios running through my mind. Thinking of that little white kitten clinging on for dear life with its tiny claws, then shrivelled up and dead.

The experience taught me a vivid lesson: going down is much harder than going up. To generalize from this, you might say that results overwhelm causes and neutralize them. In some cases, a cat is killed in the process; in other cases, a human being.

At any rate, there's really only one thing that I wanted to get across here. A single, obvious fact:

I am the ordinary son of an ordinary man. Which is pretty self-evident, I know. But, as I started to unearth that fact, it became clear to me that everything that had happened in my father's life and in my life was accidental. We live our lives this way: viewing things that came about through accident and happenstance as the sole possible reality.

To put it another way, imagine raindrops falling on a broad stretch of land. Each one of us is a nameless raindrop among countless drops. A discrete, individual drop, for sure, but one that's entirely replaceable. Still, that solitary raindrop has its own emotions, its own history, its own duty to carry on that history. Even if it loses its individual integrity and is absorbed into a collective something. Or maybe precisely because it's absorbed into a larger, collective entity.

Occasionally, my mind takes me back to that looming pine tree in the garden of our house in Shukugawa. To thoughts of that little kitten, still clinging to a branch, its body turning to bleached bones. And I think of death, and how very difficult it is to climb straight down to the ground, so far below you that it makes your head spin. ♦

*(Translated, from the Japanese,
by Philip Gabriel.)*