Birds Enter Clouds

by telophase

Summary

Sometimes the Book of Friends felt like a letter from his grandmother Reiko, written for him in the darkest part of his life.

(The title is a Japanese poetic convention.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Paranoid that he'd forgotten something or, more likely, that something had invited itself along, Natsume stopped in his tracks and inventoried his overnight bag once more. Chocolate, clothes, bean paste cakes, toiletries, matcha soft candy, Book of Friends, mochi cakes, potato chips, assorted gummy candy, check. Absence of cat, check. This summer's school trip might be one journey on which Nyanko-sensei wouldn't accompany him, although Natsume was doubtful. He pulled a small towel from his bag and wiped the sweat from his face, then stuffed it back in and resumed walking. He couldn't remember a hotter summer, which was saying quite a lot for this area of Japan, and unusually for summer, there had been no rain for weeks to break the heat. The air was already thick with heat and humidity at barely eight A.M. He hadn't seen any of the local youkai this morning; maybe they were lying low and conserving energy.

Nearing the train station, he could see other students from his grade milling about, laughing and quivering with pent-up excitement. Not many of them cared for the historical value of their destination—the town of Magome, an Edo-era post station along the old Nakasendo Highway—but they were happy to put up with teachers lecturing in their general direction in exchange for a couple of days outside the classroom.
"Oi! Natsume!" Nishimura waved frantically at him. "Hurry up! Watanabe-sensei's taking names for room assignments at the inn!"

Kitamoto clapped Nishimura on the shoulder. "Calm down, you'll have a heatstroke. It's all right, I signed up for him. We're sharing a room with Tanuma." He waved in Natsume's general direction. "Hey."

"Hey." Natsume couldn't think of anything else to say and covered up his awkwardness by pulling his hand towel from his bag and wiping his face. Still no sign of Nyanko-sensei. The last time Natsume had seen him, he was escaping the heat by sprawling on the cool tile on the kitchen floor in Touko-san's way as she fussed about. He'd barely twitched an ear as Natsume tickled him under the chin on the way out the door.

Tanuma's voice came from behind him. "Ponta in there?"

"Doesn't look like it. I think we escaped."

"Ah. Too bad. Things tend to be exciting when that ugly cat's around."

"That's one way of putting it," said Natsume. He staggered slightly as Nishimura threw himself between them, pointing down the tracks.

"Here comes the train!"

* * *

The rickety local bus that was the last leg of the trip disgorged the students at the Magome bus stop. The main street of the old town was made of grey paving stones set up the side of a hill that rose sharply from the bus stop, curving out of sight as it ascended, and was lined with replicas of old-style shops, restaurants, tradesman's workshops, and inns. Natsume thought the town was aggressively picturesque. Naturally, the inn the school booked the students into was about three-quarters of the way up the street.

"They didn't tell us it was vertical!" Nishimura wailed as he dragged his bag into the room the four boys were to share.

Kitamoto, Tanuma, and Natsume had already staked their spots in the traditional inn room, leaving the spot farthest from the window and its weak breeze for Nishimura, who groused a bit about it as he collapsed onto the tatami mats, fanning himself with his hands. The room was cooler than the outside, but still warm. It was of a reasonable size, with a bit more space than needed for four futons spread out on the floor plus a low table. One wall was entirely shoji screens. On the other side of the shoji, one end of a little wooden-floored passageway opened to the door of the room. Another wall held a low ledge, on which was a small television and an electric fan that Nishimura fell on with gleeful cries. There was also a tokonoma, an alcove in which was displayed a scroll with a painting of a mountain scene and a moth-eaten stuffed pheasant. The pheasant had a mad gleam in its glass eye that unnerved the boys until Kitamoto rummaged in the futon closet and found a towel to throw over its head. Natsume still felt like it might come alive late at night and stalk about the room, but kept his nervousness to himself.

There was a knock on the door, and Watanabe-sensei stuck his balding head into the room. "Is there room for one more in here? Sato Hiroshi from, er..." He consulted a clipboard. "...from Class 5 needs a place to sleep."

The four looked at each other and shrugged. "Sure," replied Kitamoto.
"Did he bring any snacks? That's the important question," asked Nishimura.

Sato, an average-looking boy who needed a haircut, pushed past Watanabe and waved sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't get a chance to shop."

"Hurry up and get settled. We're meeting outside the inn for tours in ten minutes." Watanabe withdrew, leaving the boys alone.

"Class 5? Do you know Taki-chan?" inquired Nishimura. "If you could sort of put in a good word about me to her..."

Sato regarded Nishimura for a moment, before answering regretfully. "Unfortunately, I'm leaving after the trip."

"Parents moving in the middle of the school year? That's tough." said Tanuma.

Sato cast his eyes down sadly, then nodded. "Something like that."

Nishimura sniffed. "Hmph. Well, to make up for not having any food, you can buy us something in town."

"Agreed." Sato smiled.

A muffled sound something like greeooeechohh came from the vicinity of the luggage. Natsume winced.

"Oi, I thought you said you didn't bring Ponta!" Tanuma said.

"I didn't," sighed Natsume. He opened his bag. Nyanko-sensei snored gently on a bed of empty potato chip and candy bar wrappers. "He brought himself."

* * *

Later, Natsume was hard put to remember much about the history of Magome from the tour. The teachers arranged the students into several groups, each with its own tour leader, and each group started at a different location along the street. With no clouds to break the sunshine as it beat down, tempers flared and teachers snapped unnecessarily at students who talked or otherwise got out of line. Inside the buildings it wasn't much better, as the humidity ushered the heat in. Chartered buses stopped at the foot of the hill, spewing out tourists until the streets were packed. Some locals wore Edo-era clothing, including a postman who insisted that everyone he could stop take a photograph with him. The heat was harsh enough that the teachers conferred and canceled the afternoon hike to a nearby shrine whose torii gate was just visible amongst the trees on a tall hillside near the town.

With relief the students broke out on their own to use their unexpected free time to shop for souvenirs. Nishimura and Kitamoto, the hapless Sato in tow, struck out for a convenience store down the street to buy snacks to make up for the extra person and Nyanko-sensei's depredations. Natsume thought Touko-san and Shigure-san might appreciate something made by a local craftsman. Tanuma spotted a weaving shop, and they pushed through the tourists.

"I'm sorry." Natsume apologized to the short woman in a yukata he'd bumped into.

"Not at all, young man." She nodded genially at him, then faded into the crowd.

Tanuma looked at him, head on one side. "What was that about? Did you see one of them?"
"Huh? That woman--"

"You talked to the air. I could see a sort of shadow."

So...not human. "No, I ..." Natsume trailed to a stop. It's all right to tell Tanuma. "Yeah."

"Are there any more around?"

"I haven't seen any others. Truth."

Tanuma nodded and changed the subject, pointing to a scarf on display. "You think Touko-san would like that?"

* * *

Nishimura and Kitamoto caught up with them a bit later as Tanuma and Natsume sat drinking soda on a bench outside a small restaurant.

"Where's Sato?" said Tanuma, holding the cold can against his face.

Kitamoto shrugged. "Around here somewhere. He took off after we bought all this." He indicated the plastic bags bulging with junk food they carried.

"I'm right here."

Nishimura and Kitamoto jumped as Sato appeared behind them. He carried a bag from which emerged a nutty smell. He pulled out five gohei-mochi--roughly pounded mochi wrapped around skewers, brushed with sauce and grilled--and handed them round. "I remembered this shop from the last time I visited. They use a sauce made from walnuts gathered nearby."

"You're not such a bad sort, after all." Nishimura spoke with his mouth full. Sato smiled pleasantly. The others thanked him, and all five boys sat on the bench in the heat, eating gohei-mochi in the late-afternoon sun and bantering about girls, sports, the lack of rain, the passing tourists, and anything else that drifted into the conversation. Mindful of his earlier discussion with Tanuma, Natsume searched the passing crowds carefully but didn't recognize anyone as a youkai. He leaned back against the rough cedar wall of the restaurant and let the words wash over and around him, an odd, niggling sensation in their wake.

Is this what normal feels like?

* * *

After the five had eaten dinner and holed up in their room to binge on junk food with the appetite only a teenage boy can muster, Nishimura declared the heat made it a perfect night to tell ghost stories. He turned off all the lights except for a weak one near the door, which glowed faintly through the shoji screen. "Do you know any?" he asked Natsume.

Natsume had never had a friend long enough to learn any stories, and he wasn't about to say anything about the youkai he'd seen. Embarrassed, he mumbled, "Not really."

Nishimura turned to Tanuma, who was fanning himself with a sheet of paper he'd ripped from a notebook. "Your father's a Buddhist priest, right? Has anything happened to him?"

Tanuma looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully as he unwrapped a piece of soft matcha candy. "Nothing as far as I know, but he once told me a story that his teacher told him, back when he was
first studying, that he said *his* teacher told him. It was a long time ago. The priest was called in to an old farmhouse because the family who lived there thought the house was haunted. You’d put something down and a few minutes later, it was moved somewhere else. They’d hear knocking on the walls, and could hear sounds up in the darkness of the rafters. When the priest came in and started chanting the Nenbutsu prayer with the family, they heard a child's voice up in the rafters, chanting along with them."

"So it was a zashiki-warashi?" asked Kitamoto.

"Yeah. It was the ghost of a daughter of the family who had starved to death during a drought like the one we're having now. The priest exorcised her, and they never had any problems after that." Tanuma popped the candy into his mouth. "That's all."

"Not very scary, then," said Nishimura. Natsume hid a smile at his evident disappointment.

Kitamoto took another drink from the can he held. "My cousin says this really scary thing happened to him once."

"Tell us, tell us!" begged Nishimura.

Kitamoto lowered his voice, and the boys leaned in to listen. "He was on vacation, visiting friends in Hawaii. One night he wakes up struggling for breath. It's like something big and heavy is sitting on his chest, and he can't move or open his eyes. He tries hard to yell, to wiggle his fingers or toes, to do anything. Finally he's able to open his eyes, and you know what's there? This huge head, floating in the air right above his chest. It's bright red with a bushy black beard, and just emanates evil. It grins at him maliciously, and then fades away, into nothing."

Nishimura whistled. "Wow. Did he ever see it again?"

Kitamoto shrugged. "Nope. I think he had a nightmare. Still, when he told his friend, the friend had his house blessed."

"I might, too!" Nishimura turned to Sato, who sat surrounded by chocolate-bar wrappers. "Your turn!"

"I don't have any stories like that," he said. "I can tell you the story of that shrine we didn't go to."

"If you don't have anything scary, okay," Nishimura said.

Sato sat up straighter. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and began, speaking in low, measured tones. "Once, long ago, a Buddhist ascetic lived in a hut far away on a mountaintop. He chanted sutras for hours every day. Word of his holiness spread among the people of the land, and even among the birds and animals. One day, a small dragon crept up the mountaintop and sat there, listening. When the holy man finished chanting, he left, but he returned a few days later to listen. Eventually, the dragon and the ascetic struck up a friendship. They would share a simple meal and talk in the evenings about the Buddha and other subjects, watching the fireflies dance in the night."

"A while later, a great drought struck the land. Rivers and springs dried up, plants withered, and the rice crop failed. The people were starving. Nobody knew what to do. The story of the ascetic and the dragon reached the ears of the emperor one day. He summoned the ascetic to him, and commanded him to tell the dragon to make it rain, as everyone knew dragons controlled the water."

"The ascetic wasn't happy about imposing on his friend like that, but he had no choice. The next time the dragon came to listen to his sutras, the ascetic told him what the emperor had said."
"I am not in charge of the rains,' said the dragon. 'If I bring them, I will be killed for my presumption. But I love this world, and you are my friend and I am grateful that you let me listen to you, and for all these reasons and more I will do this thing.'

"The ascetic sorrowed at this, for he loved his friend but he was also bound by his emperor. The dragon leaped into the air and flew away to the west.

"A week later, the rains came. Rivers soon flowed over the land and the plants grew green. The people rejoiced, all except the ascetic who grieved for his dragon friend. He decided to journey west until he found some sign of him. Each place he traveled through, he found that his friend had paused there for a little while on his final journey, talking to people and animals and admiring the beauty of the area until he flew on, west toward the mountains.

"After the ascetic entered the mountains, he came upon the scattered remains of the dragon. He sorrowed for his friend's fate, and resolved to honor his sacrifice. On that spot he built a shrine and lived in it, chanting sutras in honor of the dragon who sacrificed himself to bring the rain, for the rest of his days."

Sato's voice fell away, and silence reigned for a short time.

"Huh," said Nishimura. "That sucked for the dragon."

Sato shrugged. "He was happy. It gave his life meaning. Something he could return to the world that had so delighted him."

Nyanko-sensei, curled up in Natsume's lap, stretched and eyed Sato.

Nishimura looked doubtful. "Well, I still wouldn't do that."

"Not many would," agreed Kitamoto. "Your turn. You haven't told us a story."

Nishimura grinned. "Chiba-kun in Class 3 told me that the school he transferred from was haunted. There was this girl, see? And she had died in a car accident on the way to school. Or maybe she killed herself in the music room? No, I think she was pushed off the roof? Anyway..." The story continued in that manner for some time, Nishimura thoroughly confusing every detail he could recall, until he eventually trailed off. The boys agreed that no matter what had happened, it was probably scary.

As they continued talking into the night, Natsume looked around at their faces. Tanuma, cool as always, nodded at something Kitamoto said. Nishimura stuffed his face with bean paste cakes as he regaled Sato with another mixed-up story. Sato nodded, seemingly rapt. As Nishimura wound to a close, Sato looked up and caught Natsume's eye. He smiled with genuine warmth.

Natsume smiled back. He'd never had an evening like this before.

* * *

Late that night candy wrappers and empty bags of snack cakes festooned the room, rustling in the cross-breeze between the fan and the open window. The boys pulled futons from the closet and spread them on the floor, sliding under thin cotton sheets to thwart any mosquitoes that breached the window. Natsume lay on his futon, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling and musing on the day's events.

It gave his life meaning. Sato's statement floated up from his memory. Huh. A year ago, Natsume didn't think he'd have understood that point of view, but his life was changing in unexpected ways
and he found himself in sympathy. Sometimes the Book of Friends felt like a letter from his
grandmother Reiko, written for him in the darkest part of his life. He'd heard about a practice that
used to be done at some shrines, where devout pilgrims would buy sparrows from merchants who
captured and caged them so that the buyers could gain spiritual merit from the act of releasing them.
He supposed that the feeling he got when he returned a name that Reiko had trapped in the Book of
Friends might be something like that in the heart of a pilgrim, undoing the catch of the door, opening
the cage and setting the bird free, watching it fly into the sky and get lost amidst the clouds. As he
gazed after the sparrow with his mind's eye, he fell asleep.

Natsume dreamed.

*He soars through a cloudless sky, exulting in the sensation of liberation from gravity, swooping and
turning barrel-rolls in the harsh sun. An eagle joins him, wings outstretched and almost motionless
as it sails the air currents searching the ground below for prey. When it spots a tiny movement and
stoops, folding its wings back and turning itself into a downward projectile, he follows, rocketing
earthward. The eagle slams into its prey and rises, mouse dangling from its claws, and Natsume
pulls out of his dive at the last second. He skims just above the ground, passing over fields and
rivers, feeling the spray of a waterfall cool his body as he flies near it.*

Tiring of that, he ascends into the limitless sky, alone. To the west, he sees a distant cloud bank. The
sun is burning his skin so he flies towards the clouds for relief. As he nears, the clouds build up fast;
amost before he knows it, he's flying into a thunderhead, angry purple and grey, flat on the bottom
where it squats on a lower layer of air, with cloud boiling over its edges. Natsume banks to the right,
but the clouds surround him. Winds buffet him, tossing him up and down. He frantically tries to
gain some sort of control of his movement, but is carried into the heart of the storm. The hair all over
his body stands on end and he hears a sound so loud that it is no sound at all as a bolt of lightning
slams into his chest.

Natsume snapped awake. A weight on his chest pressed him deep into his futon and he couldn't
move, breathe, or open his eyes. He fought against the paralysis gripping him, and forced his eyes
open. A large, hairy, ugly, out-of-focus head loomed directly in front of his face. It snored. Natsume
regained control of his limbs and reflexively punched the head, which flew across the room and
slammed into the wall.

"Eeeeyyyyyyyyyaaaargghh! Idiot human!" Nyanko-sensei stared balefully at Natsume, who belatedly
realized that Nyanko-sensei had been snoozing on his chest until the moment before. The others
stirred, and Nyanko-sensei regained his composure, confining his next comment to an affronted
growl before stalking over to the open window, leaping on to the sill, and jumping to the roof tiles
outside.

"Mmph? What was that?" Kitamoto asked.

"Sorry. Bad dream."

"Call a baku to come eat your dream," Sato advised. "It won't trouble you any further."

"Well, I *must* have been dreaming. It sounded like your cat called you an idiot!" Nishimura laughed
quietly, then called "Good hunting, Nyanko-sensei!" out the window. He turned his pillow over to
the cooler side, and sank back into sleep.

Natsume laid back down on his futon and brooded on the dream. He wasn't about to call a baku--
perhaps Sato, Kitamoto, and Nishimura didn't believe in youkai who came to eat your nightmares,
but he wasn't about to risk calling one up. Enough came to him of their own will that he didn't need
to invite them into his life.
Strangely few today, though. Just that one woman in the street. He sighed. *Will there be a time when most of my days are like today?* Once, he would have given anything for a day without youkai, but now...it was complicated. Natsume rolled onto his side. When he fell asleep, it was fitful.

* * *

The journey home was more subdued than the trip out, as most of the students were sleep-deprived from staying up late. Sato swung into the seat next to Natsume on the bus from Magome to the train station. "Thank you for letting me stay in your room," he said.

"Not at all," said Natsume. "I hope Nishimura didn't bother you."

Sato laughed. "I don't mind. He's so full of life."

"That's one way of putting it." Natsume smiled back. He understood what Sato meant.

"I do mean it, though. Thank you." Sato regarded him with an expression Natsume couldn't interpret.

The bus wheezed to a halt at the station five minutes before their train left, and Natsume ended up seated next to Tanuma in the train car.

"How's Ponta doing?" Tanuma asked.

"Snoring like a pig after eating half my breakfast this morning." A muffled "I heard that!" emanated from Natsume's bag, and he glanced around nervously. Nobody else had noticed.

Tanuma laughed. Natsume relaxed and joined his friend in mirth.

* * *

One more transfer, and they were on the final leg of the trip. Natsume dozed most of way, waking up once when Nishimura, sitting next to him on this leg, dug his elbow into Natsume's ribs, hissing "There's Taki-chan! Think of something for me to say to her!" as she returned down the aisle from the bathroom.

Late in the afternoon, the train pulled into their home station and the students thronged out. Natsume stood up and heaved his bag carefully down from the luggage rack above the seats, so as not to hurt Nyanko-sensei, and exited from the cool of the climate-controlled train car into the heat and humidity on the station platform, which hit his chest hard. He felt himself break instantly into a sweat and dug around Nyanko-sensei in his bag for the towel to wipe his face.

A little farther down the platform, Nishimura had found enough nerve to chat Taki up. Natsume approached them in time to hear Nishimura say, "We roomed with one of the guys from your class. Sato-kun."

Taki looked puzzled. "Sato-kun? I don't think there's anyone by that name in Class 5."

"Yeah. He's..." Nishimura rotated, searching for Sato. "I don't see him. Huh. You seen him, Natsume?"

Natsume shook his head. "Not since the bus trip."

"Strange. Did he go to the bathroom or something at the station and miss the train?"

Natsume and his three friends walked back to their homes, chatting about nothing in particular. Nyanko-sensei jumped out of Natsume's bag and accompanied them, occasionally taking a detour to...
chase a butterfly or stalk a grasshopper. Kitamoto and Nishimura peeled off from the group when they passed the road that led their homes, waving goodbye and shouting "See you in school Monday!"

A little farther on, Kitamoto turned off down his road. "See you Monday, if we don't die of heatstroke first. Bye, Ponta"

"See you." Natsume waved to him, then mopped sweat from his face and continued home.

Home? When did he start thinking of the Fujiwara house as home? It was a strange and not entirely unwelcome sensation. He shook himself and addressed Nyanko-sensei, who had pinned a grasshopper down with one paw.

"Nobody tried to eat me yesterday or today. I guess you're not getting the Book of Friends yet."

"I can wait. I have infinite patience."

"Not when it comes to shrimp."

"Shrimp are different," Nyanko-sensei said primly.

"At any rate, it was the quietest couple of days I've had in a long time."

"That's because weak youkai tend to avoid the powerful ones," said Nyanko-sensei. He lifted his paw, releasing the grasshopper. "No point in aggravating someone who can squash you like a bug."

Natsume glanced down at the cat, who sat in the road with that infuriating smile upon his face, listening to the buzz of the grasshopper's wings fade into the distance. "They don't avoid you around here. I guess they know you too well."

Nyanko-sensei didn't deign to answer.

A few minutes later, Natsume turned down the road to the Fujiwara house. Outside, he saw Touko-san and Shigure-san standing near the car, hood raised, looking down at the engine. Touko-san glanced up and spotted Natsume, and waved to him. "Hello, Takashi-kun!" Shigure also looked up, and waved.

"Welcome home!"

* * *

Natsume woke up shortly after midnight. Although still hot, the air felt different, a little electric. Nyanko-sensei crouched on the windowsill, watching the night. It was strangely quiet. Natsume couldn't even hear the cicadas, whose buzzing usually drowned out soft noises all summer long. He got up from his futon and joined Nyanko-sensei at the window, feeling a hot breeze against his face. There were no fireflies in the darkness.

"What's up? Is something out there?"

"Everyone's waiting."

"For what?"

Nyanko-sensei turned his head towards Natsume, his eyes reflecting the moon's light. "Look."

Natsume turned his gaze out the window, looking out at the rooftop, the trees, the distant lights of the
neighboring houses. "I don't see--wait." A tiny flash of light near the horizon. He waited three seconds, four, five, then heard a faint rumble, full of promise. "Rain?"

Nyanko-sensei faced out the window again. "It has been done."

It fell suddenly into place for Natsume. "That wasn't my dream, was it?" He gave Nyanko-sensei a hard stare. "You didn't say anything."

"The Book of Friends was in no danger, so why should I care? You're far too unperceptive."

Natsume ignored him. Leaning his elbows on the windowsill, he rested his chin in his hands and watched the storm come in.

End Notes

Much thanks to my lovely betas from LJ, Batwrangler, Badnoodles, and Myrialux!

The title is a kigo, or word/phrase associated with a particular season in poetry. "Tori kumo ni iru" actually refers to the mid-spring, when birds that winter in Japan head north but I callously ripped it from its roots to use it here because I thought the imagery of birds ascending and vanishing was apropos. I apologize for my butchering of Japanese poetic form.

Sato's story is adapted from one translated by Royall Tyler in his book "Japanese Tales." The red head pressing Kitamoto's cousin to his futon is adapted from a story in Glen Grant's "Obake Files," a collection of ghost stories from Hawai'i (and fits a cross-cultural sleep paralysis phenomenon known as the Old Hag). Tanuma's story is an amalgam of two Japanese ghost stories recounted in "Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends" by Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken.

Magome is one of three post towns in the Kiso Valley region along the Nakasendo Highway (a branch off of the old Tokaido Road that ran from Kyoto to Edo) that are rebuilt to look like they did back in the Edo era. They are indeed aggressively picturesque, and after the reveal I'll post a link to my pictures of Magome.

ETA: The links are here:
http://www.magatsu.net/gallery/v/Japan2007/Magome/

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