

PRAISE FOR KEIICHIRO HIRANO

“Hirano’s English-language debut is a shape-shifting psychological thriller . . . As back-alley gritty and entertaining as a Raymond Chandler novel, the book asks what it means to be ‘you’ and suggests that the answer means nothing at all. Hirano’s stylish, suspenseful noir should earn him a stateside audience.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Keiichiro Hirano’s *A Man* has all the trappings of a gripping detective story: a bereaved wife, a dead man whose name belongs to someone else, mysterious coded letters, a lawyer intent on uncovering the truth. Together with a willfully understated title, however, these features belie a deeply thoughtful novel whose mystery premise gives way to an examination of the most profound questions of identity and artistic creation. In a work so rooted in Japanese cultural history, the questions posed by the author become distinctly literary, moving ultimately to address the very practice of novel writing.”

—The Arts Desk

“A riveting examination of desire and identity, *A Man* patiently unpicks the nature of unfulfilled aspirations. Keiichiro Hirano has written a multilayered tale of human reinvention, at once eminently readable and deeply moving.”

—Tash Aw, author of *The Harmony Silk Factory* and
Five Star Billionaire

“There is no doubt that Keiichiro Hirano is an author with an extremely pioneering and modern spirit. His works have opened up a very imaginative space in analyzing and exploring the spiritual world of humanity.”

—Sheng Keyi, author of *Northern Girls* and *Death Fugue*

“Hirano has continued to grapple with new themes ever since his debut. In this work, he has arrived at the primal question of what validates human existence.”

—Yōko Ogawa, author of *The Memory Police*

AT THE
END
OF THE
MATINEE

ALSO BY KEIICHIRO HIRANO

A Man

AT THE
END
OF THE
MATINEE

KEIICHIRO
HIRANO

Translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter



AMAZON CROSSING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2016 by Keiichiro Hirano

Translation copyright © 2021 by Juliet Winters Carpenter

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Previously published as マチネの終わりに (*Matinee no owarini*) in the Mainichi Newspapers in 2015 originally and a book published by 毎日新聞出版株式会社 Mainichi Shinbun Publishing Inc. in Japan in 2016. A paperback version was published by Bungeishunju 文藝春秋 in 2019. Translated from Japanese by Juliet Winters Carpenter. First published in English by Amazon Crossing in 2021. English translation rights under the license granted by Cork, Inc., and Media Do International, Inc.

Published by Amazon Crossing, Seattle

www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Crossing are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781542005180 (paperback)

ISBN-10: 1542005183 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 9781542005203 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1542005205 (hardcover)

Cover design by David Drummond

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

AT THE
END
OF THE
MATINEE

PROLOGUE

This is the story of two people whom I call Satoshi Makino and Yoko Komine. To protect their privacy, I have altered various details: their names, to begin with, as well as the organizations they belong to, the chronology of events, and so forth.

If I were to be absolutely faithful to the truth, I myself would have to make an appearance in certain scenes, but no such person exists in the novel.

My purpose in writing their story was not to lay their lives bare. Realizing that the story is not completely “true” may lessen its interest for some readers. But while fiction makes it possible to refrain from revealing some secrets, it is the only way to reveal others. I wished, while guarding the outer details of my friends’ lives, to write freely about their inner emotional lives by presenting them as fictional characters.

When Satoshi and Yoko first met, they were, to borrow from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, “midway in the journey of our life,” losing sight of “the straight way.” Both were around forty, an age of peculiarly delicate anxiety. Whether they envisioned the bright hustle and bustle of their lives continuing or coming to an end, they felt dispirited. And just as in those opening lines, though it was “a hard thing to speak of,” they found themselves lost in that “dark wood.”

What name should I give the feeling that my friends had for each other? Was it friendship? Was it love? They maintained a strong relationship

of trust that brought equal parts suffering and healing, and, at times, even a semblance of hatred; but investigating only the outer aspect of that relationship would tell us nothing.

I came to know Satoshi first, and later, Yoko. I was therefore in a position to fully sense why the two of them were so drawn to each other.

Brilliance and desolation appear intermittently in the record of their lives. Joy and sadness play tug-of-war. This is all the more reason why the alignment of their souls possesses a quality that is rare in today's world—a quality that I shall call, if I may, beauty.

I sympathized with them, grew disgusted with them sometimes, and yet I admired them. Nothing is as tedious as the romance of others, but in their case it was different. Why? Over the course of a few years, I experienced several enormous disappointments, and pondering their romance in spare moments offered a brief escape.

From the first, theirs were lives I was incapable of leading, yet even now I often wonder what I would have done if those things had happened to me.

Their lives contain riddles, some of which I never did fathom. They were such distant figures, even for me, that the reader should beware of hurrying to feel a direct sympathy for them, lest they elude the reader altogether.

As time went on, my desire to write about them grew, and when the time felt right, I picked up my pen.

1

The Long Night of the First Encounter

In 2006, classical guitarist Satoshi Makino turned thirty-eight. To celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his professional debut, he gave an extraordinary number of concerts that year—thirty-five in his home country of Japan, fifty-one overseas.

Tonight was the crowning event of a hugely successful tour. The autumn leaves in the vicinity of Tokyo's Suntory Hall were just then at their peak, and the trees, lit up by champagne-colored lights, shone brilliantly. A cold wind was blowing, sometimes strong enough to whirl the leaves, but this only kindled greater excitement in the hearts of the people standing outside, bundled in coats, tickets in hand.

Makino's performance that evening was talked about long afterward.

The main item on the program was *Concierto de Aranjuez*, which he performed with the New Japan Philharmonic orchestra; for his three encores he played Lauro's "Seis por derecho," then his own arrangement of Brahms's Intermezzo no. 2 in A Major, and finally a Toru Takemitsu arrangement of the Beatles' "Yesterday." The instrument he played on was for once not his beloved Fleta but a Greg Smallman guitar.

Ever since his storied debut at eighteen, when he'd taken first prize in the Paris International Guitar Competition, Makino's performances had always been sure-footed and trouble-free. The past twenty years had demonstrated not only that he possessed talent, but that of the many talents out there, his was singularly fine.

Makino's listeners frequently forgot to breathe. His stylistic perfection made it impossible to half listen, critics often said, and this wasn't entirely a compliment—the wry implication was that listening to Makino perform was a bit exhausting.

From the first, he was so excessively good at whatever he played, in any genre, that some thought he lacked commitment and was merely toying with his talent. Others found him thoughtful, partly because of the look of brooding concentration he wore while playing, like a chess player staring at the board.

That night, he showed an insightful understanding of the music with startlingly original interpretations that won listeners over: “Yes, yes, of course!” Even in the third movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, the music was articulated in such fine-honed and loving detail that every nuance came alive, leading some critics to raise an eyebrow, surprised to discover that a piece so infamously difficult—it seldom sounded impressive, no matter who the performer was—should turn out to possess such charm. In short, the music was so persuasively rendered that, regardless of one's personal likes and dislikes, it was impossible to find fault with any of it.

At the encore, as if on cue, the audience rose in a standing ovation. While clapping, people leaned backward slightly and thrust their arms forward as far as they could in hopes of getting him to hear them. The height of clapping hands rises in direct proportion to the degree the applauder is moved; this was another thing the audience discovered that evening.

With every curtain call, Makino gave a refined bow of a slightly different flavor. He showed how satisfied and moved he was, not hiding his fatigue. The shy smile on his face, so different from the solemn expression of moments before, radiated the exhilaration he often displayed on television talk shows.

After the concert, the lobby was in an uproar, creating a synergy that convinced people their private impression was right: the performance

had been stupendous. People who had come without a companion quickly began sharing their excitement online, standing stock still and causing others to bump into them with annoyance.

The recording of the concert, released afterward as a CD, went on to win that year's Record Academy Award and sold extremely well for an album of classical music—classical guitar, no less. It was reviewed widely, covered not just in specialty magazines and newspapers but also on television, giving even those with no interest in music the vague notion that that fellow Makino must really be something, all right.

The value of having attended that concert subsequently rose even higher, as Satoshi Makino's solo performances came to an abrupt halt, ushering in a period of long silence.

Looking back, there was one incident that might have been an omen. After the concert, more people than usual flocked backstage to see Makino, but he kept them waiting for nearly forty minutes. Suspicion mounted that he might have collapsed in his dressing room, but his manager, Sanae Mitani, adamantly refused to let anyone open the door.

Mitani, who had been in her position at Kinoshita Music for a year or so, had recently turned thirty with a resigned sigh. She had a round, pink-cheeked face, short brown hair parted on one side, and black-framed glasses. Her appearance inclined people to treat her like a child, but she was a woman of spirit. Older men in particular tended to fall into one of two camps, either lavishing affection on her or bristling with displeasure.

Before going into his dressing room, Makino had left instructions that no one was to knock on the door. Why he'd said this, Mitani didn't know, but she faithfully carried out his wishes. Finally, he emerged, apologizing in a droll way: "Sorry to keep you waiting, folks. I don't know, I just ran out of steam. I guess that's what happens when you're coming up on forty." He twisted his head from side to side to loosen the tendons in his neck.

He had changed into a white shirt subtly embroidered with tiny white stars, a black jacket, and narrow-leg cargo pants in dark moss green. His face looked refreshed and his hair was combed. He was smiling, but his glance darted from face to face as if he were unsure where to look.

His staff was relieved, judging from his expression that he was all right. Afterward, they all remembered seeing a 750-milliliter bottle of Evian water lying empty on the floor. When one of them brought it up, the others chimed in: “Yes, right! That struck me as odd too.” Though what it might have meant, none of them knew.

During the forty minutes he was hidden away, unavailable, most of those waiting had given up and gone home. He exchanged friendly, gracious greetings with the few who had stuck it out. At the end of the line was Keiko Korenaga, his contact at Jupiter, chatting with a woman with pretty hair.

Long before the two women’s turn came up, Makino was aware of them, glancing their way more than once. More precisely, it wasn’t “them” he checked out but rather Korenaga’s unknown companion. From the stage he had noticed her, having spotted her sitting in the orchestra section. His gaze, searching for Korenaga, had been drawn to the woman at her side and lingered there, his interest piqued by the small, fair face whose features he couldn’t quite make out.

Lustrous black hair fell to her slightly square shoulders and crossed in front, the way a woman crosses her ankles. Her nose was well defined, eyes not deep set, eyebrows a pair of serene arcs. Her large eyes turned down slightly at the corners and crinkled when she smiled, giving her the air of a mischief-loving boy. Wound around her slender, pale neck was a scarf with a design of flowers scattered on a checkered background of black and pale green. Her lightly distressed jeans looked good on her long, straight legs.

Makino ended up studying her longer than was prudent. Then, when it was finally their turn and she stood before him, he hastily slid

his gaze over to Korenaga at her side. After speaking words of praise and appreciation, Korenaga introduced the woman. “This is Yoko Komine. She’s a reporter for the French news agency RFI.”

Smiling, Yoko said, “Congratulations,” and shook his hand.

The word sounded to him like a direct translation from a foreign language. Westerners often greeted him with “Congratulations!” or “*Félicitations!*” after a concert. Her makeup was applied with a light touch, unlike that of many young Japanese women; her name was Japanese, but her features suggested she might be part Japanese and part something else.

“That Brahms you played for an encore is a favorite of mine,” she said. “The arrangement was marvelous.”

Makino’s eyes widened in pure pleasure. She was the first to speak of that piece instead of the *Aranjuez*, and moreover, it was the only performance he’d been satisfied with tonight.

“Thank you. It’s not an easy piece to play.”

“I was entranced.” She laid a hand on her breast and smiled without exaggeration. Her voice was low and resonant—a cultivated voice, he thought. “It was as if the music were taking me to some far-off place, urging me to come along, leading me gently by the hand.”

Makino held out his arms smoothly, as if inviting her to dance. “Actually, that was me, issuing you a personal invitation from the stage.”

She looked surprised at this forwardness, perhaps put off.

“Watch out, Yoko,” said Korenaga. “Makino is a bit of a ladies’ man, and he’s stayed single all his life. A word to the wise.”

“Come on, don’t say such slanderous things about me. Is that really what you think?”

“What everybody thinks. But I’ve got news for you: Yoko has a fiancé. Somebody she met in college—an economist, your polar opposite. And he’s an American.”

Makino withdrew his hands, as if he had just been cautioned against touching a work of art. “That *is* too bad. What do you mean,

‘He’s an American?’” He glanced down at Yoko’s left hand, where a platinum ring sparkled on the fourth finger.

Listening to their banter, Yoko evidently decided not to be standoffish. “Anyway, I always liked Glenn Gould’s rendition of that Brahms, but from now on I’ll listen to Satoshi Makino’s version on guitar.” Her expression softened.

“I like the Glenn Gould recording a lot too. If you do listen again, I’m pretty sure you’ll decide it’s better after all, so do me a favor and stay away from it.” He grinned. “I’m joking, of course. He’s a total genius, far above me, but we do have one thing in common.”

“Oh? What’s that? Are you sensitive to cold too?”

“Could be, now that you mention it. But no, actually, I hate giving live concerts.”

Yoko took this in. “Then tonight you did a brilliant job of enduring us ‘spectators at a bullfight.’” She locked eyes with him for several seconds.

A bit shaken by her gaze, at once probing and profoundly understanding, he felt his social smile slip and struggled to retrieve it.

His manager, Mitani, standing to one side with Makino’s guitar case in her arms, frowned. She had apparently mistaken “spectators at a bullfight” for Yoko’s own phrasing, not realizing it was a Glenn Gould quotation. Meanwhile, Korenaga, assuming from the look on Makino’s face that Yoko had incurred his displeasure, rushed to continue her introduction.

“Yoko’s father is the director of that movie you like so much, Makino-san. *Coins of Happiness*.”

“Really? Jerko Solich?” He turned to Yoko in astonishment.

“Yes, I’m the daughter of his second wife, who’s Japanese. They were already divorced by the time I was old enough to notice, and I hardly lived with him at all, but we are in touch now.”

“Is that right! That movie is the reason I fell in love with the guitar in the first place. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen it, ever since

I was a kid!" He paused. "Well, well, well. I have the greatest respect for your father. I really do."

"Thank you. I actually knew you admired his work. As a matter of fact, this is the second time I've heard you play. After you won the Paris International Guitar Competition, my mother and I went to see you. We were so excited that a Japanese person had won! It was at the Salle Pleyel, wasn't it?"

"What? Are you serious? Good lord. I mean, I'm honored, but . . . back then I was still pretty bad."

"Not at all. Your playing was so wonderful, I was madly jealous. To think that a high school boy two years younger than me could play the theme music from my father's film so brilliantly and be showered with accolades—it was unforgivable! I was quite put out about it." Her nose wrinkled when she laughed.

She laughs like a child, he thought.

Mitani had stepped out to make a phone call, and when she came back, she urged Makino to move along to the after-party.

Yoko glanced at her Omega watch. "Goodness, look at the time! I'm so sorry to keep you when you must be exhausted." She made as if to leave.

Swiftly, Makino said, "If you don't mind, would you come along to the party? I'd love to talk some more."

Korenaga seconded the invitation, taking her by the arm. "Yes, do come!"

Yoko hesitated, glancing again at her watch before agreeing: "All right, if you're sure I won't be in the way."

They rode in separate taxis to a Spanish restaurant nearby. By then it was going on eleven o'clock.



The dimly lit restaurant was full, except for their reserved seats. Flamenco music was playing, and the white walls by the register were decorated with visitors' autographs. Yoko slipped off her coat and studied the signature of Paco de Lucía, whose guitar music was just then filling the room.

Makino hadn't noticed a resemblance when looking at her straight on, but now, viewing her in profile, he definitely saw a touch of her father. Or maybe it was something in the way she was engaged just then in looking, feeling, and thinking.

Becoming aware of Makino's gaze on her, Yoko turned toward him, indicating the autograph. Since they had ridden in separate taxis, this was only the second time their eyes had met. Apparently at ease talking to artists, she offered him her full impression of the concert and then unself-consciously joined the circle of guests. Makino realized that he was in slight awe of her, instead of the other way around. She seemed a little unapproachable, intellectual, but there was something friendly about her at the same time, he thought, something warm and appealing.

Eight of them sat at a table and drank a toast with cava. Dish after dish was carried in, and they passed them around the table, sharing everything without ceremony.

Makino was his usual talkative self. One of his staff brought up S, Japan's leading photographer, and Makino joined in with an anecdote from his ride back from Kyoto on the bullet train toward the end of his tour.

"When I got on board, there he was in the row right in front of me, across the aisle. S can be difficult when he wants to be, so I wasn't going to say anything, but then our eyes happened to meet. After that I couldn't very well ignore him, so I went over to say hello. 'Hi, it's been a while. I'm Makino.' Then—you know that way he has—he just flicked a glance at me. Cut me dead."

"No!" someone said. "That's awful."

“I didn’t know what to do. I figured he might have forgotten who I was, even though we’d worked together. Just in case, I tried again. ‘Satoshi Makino, the guitarist.’ Even then, he just looked at me like, ‘Who is this guy?’ He was starting to piss me off.”

“Right.”

“Remember?” I said. ‘We were on that TV talk show together once, and then later on we bumped into each other in Aizuwakamatsu and went out drinking.’ And so on. I brought up one encounter after another, trying to get him to react. What do you think he said? ‘I’m afraid you are mistaken.’”

“Did you get on his wrong side somehow? Or was he just in a bad mood?”

“Well, when he said that, it kind of jolted me. So I took another look, and lo and behold, it wasn’t him after all.”

“What?”

“Yeah, the guy was a total stranger. Once I got a good look at him, I could see he was someone else. Why the *hell* I ever thought he was S in the first place, I have no idea.”

Everybody had been listening blankly; now they all burst out laughing.

“I was so embarrassed. I felt like sinking into the ground and disappearing. It wasn’t just him—everybody around was looking at me too.”

“What did you do?”

“I was in too deep to come out and say I was wrong, so I acted angry: ‘All right, *be* that way! Never mind!’”

“You didn’t apologize?”

“Couldn’t. I went back to my seat in a huff and slept.”

“You slept?”

“Pretended to. How could I sleep after all that? But I was too cowardly to open my eyes, so I stayed like that the whole rest of the way to Tokyo. Even though I had piles of work to do!”

Once again the table convulsed with laughter. As he told the story, Makino glanced at Yoko from time to time. Their eyes met more than once. She was leaning back in her chair, holding a lightly cupped hand to her mouth, shoulders shaking with mirth. “Hilarious!” she murmured, and wiped a tear from her lower eyelid with her middle finger. He felt accepted, and glad of it.

While Makino talked, Mitani had been making sure the others were served. Now, passing a dish, she said, “When you’re telling stories, Makino, you turn into someone else. Listening to you speak, it’s hard to imagine you’re the same person who gave that phenomenal performance tonight. When I first took this job, it was a continual shock.”

“That’s how most people are. People like S who get on their high horse and stay there are the exception.”

“Give the poor man a break. It wasn’t even him, for God’s sake!” said someone else, sending a new wave of laughter around the table.

Yoko, sitting across from Makino, heaped her plate with vegetables.

“Are you a vegetarian?” he asked.

“No, but now and then I concentrate on vegetables by choice. It helps me stay fit. And this is a pretty late dinner.”

Makino looked at her in some surprise. Choosing now and then to “concentrate on vegetables,” as she put it, sounded easy, but how many people managed to pull it off? He’d never met anyone with such intelligent eating habits. He felt he had glimpsed the freedom, and discipline, with which she arranged her life.

“Besides, I’m leaving soon for Iraq.”

“Iraq?”

“I went there once last year too. Sorry, I never did give you one of my business cards, did I?” She pulled out a card from a gold-colored holder, and he reached over and took it.

“How long will you be there?”

“Six weeks, then two weeks off. I’ll do that twice—so four months in all.”

“Is it safe? I saw the news about Hussein’s death sentence the other day.”

“Now is the most dangerous time since the invasion. But I’ll be all right. We have permanent staff there, and security is tight. What worries me more than anything is the scarcity of good, fresh vegetables. That’s another reason I need to eat them now.”

“Ah, so that’s it! Go on, stuff yourself while you can.”

She smiled and sipped her wine. “Before leaving for Baghdad, I wanted to surround myself with beauty. That’s why I came to your concert tonight. And I’m so glad I did.”

“After you return from Iraq, please come hear me play again. I’ll send you an invitation. Where are you based?”

“Paris. Yes, thank you, that would be so nice. I’ll go anywhere. And while I’m gone, I’ll listen to your music on my iPod.”

Here, Mitani spoke up. “Let me know, and I’ll be happy to reserve a seat for you anytime.” She and Yoko exchanged business cards.

“Thank you.”

“Have you lived in Paris long?” Mitani asked. “Makino-san lived there for a while once.”

“Oh really? I’ve lived there ever since I took this job. About ten years now, I guess. I grew up in Geneva.”

“You graduated from Columbia, right?”

Yoko looked at her with some surprise.

“I checked your father’s Wikipedia page before, in the taxi,” Mitani explained.

“Oh! I didn’t realize there was information about me on there. I studied literature at Oxford, and then I went to Columbia for graduate school.”

“Super elite! Amazing.”

“Hardly. There are a lot of people out there far more amazing than I’ll ever be. I owe a lot to my mother. She’s the one who brought me up and made it all possible. She wanted to prove something to my father,

I suppose. Her existence is wiped clean from his personal history, and he never mentions her in public. How anything about me got on his Wikipedia page I have no idea. That's the trouble with the internet, don't you think?" Yoko sounded casual, but her words sent a hush over the table.

Mitani tactfully changed the subject. "So, Yoko, how many languages do you speak?"

"Basically Japanese, French, and English, and some German I picked up in college, because I was studying German wartime literature. Rilke especially. Also I can read Latin, and I know a smattering of a few other languages, Romanian for one, but carrying on a conversation is difficult. So when people ask me how many languages I speak, I never know quite what to say."

"Whoa."

"I would really like to learn Croatian, my father's native language. When I was little, I didn't know any English, so when I saw him, we couldn't talk. And that's what my mother spoke to him in, so I could never understand what they were saying. I remember bursting into tears and wondering who my real parents were. When the chance came, I studied English for all I was worth. Still, it's neither my mother tongue nor his." She paused. "However many languages I might speak, it's sad not to know my father's."

Yoko explained this difficult situation without a trace of sentimentality, even smiling now and then. Makino, listening respectfully, paused with a forkful of omelet in midair as the realization struck him that there were parents and children in the world who didn't share a common language. He pictured Yoko as a little girl sitting across from her father, unable to do anything but smile. What might she have looked like? Had she always resembled him the way she did now? After living so long with her mother, did she discover on one of his visits that she looked like him? Solich must have seen it right away. But even if

they'd both made the same discovery, they would have had no way to share it with each other.

Makino's background was just the opposite. He'd been brought up from early childhood to fulfill the dreams of his guitar-loving father. By the time he was in kindergarten, they already shared the same language—guitar. Rather than playing music, Makino had had fun making his guitar “talk.” Though his aging father had slowly lost the ability to comprehend what Makino's guitar was saying . . .

Mitani and Yoko went on chatting, letting the sad anecdote slide without further comment. “My one linguistic claim to fame,” Mitani was saying, “is knowing Hakata dialect. My English never gets any better, sadly.”

“So you're from Fukuoka?”

“Born and bred!”

Makino spoke up teasingly. “Every day, I am made acutely aware of how strong Kyushu women are.”

“My mother's roots are in Nagasaki,” said Yoko.

“No! You're from Kyushu?” Mitani said this in a voice so loud that every head at the table turned.

“Yes. In summer and winter we used to vacation at my grandmother's house. I went swimming in the sea.”

“How about that! I feel a real bond with you now. You're Japanese after all!”

“I think I am pretty Japanese inside, actually. Everyone says so. My father's roots are a bit more complicated. He identifies much more strongly as Yugoslavian than Croatian. Plus he has some Austrian blood. My mother's family history is much simpler. I learned to speak Nagasaki dialect from my grandmother. That gave me a fondness for Japanese dialects. Hakata dialect spoken by a woman is really charming. Very attractive. And not too different from Nagasaki dialect, either.”

“See, Makino?” said Mitani, using her native dialect. “Yoko thinks so too!” Then she asked Yoko if she ever got back to Nagasaki.

“Yes, but unfortunately, my grandmother died the year before last.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. She was ninety. My mother lived in Europe from the time she was a young woman, but in the end she went back to live with Grandma, just over ten years ago. Not that Grandma needed looking after; she was really healthy and alert. She never did get sick, either—she fell.”

“How sad. Nowadays people stay healthy well into old age, so falls are what’s really dangerous.”

“It’s true. I never knew my paternal grandparents, so my Japanese grandma meant a lot to me.” After a brief pause, she said, “When she fell, she hit her head on a stone in the garden. A natural stone, about yea big. When I was a little girl, I used to play house there with my cousin, using the stone as a table and setting out red berries and leaves on it. Never dreaming that, one day, that same stone would take my grandmother’s life . . .”

Paella arrived, and Mitani scooped some onto a plate for Yoko. “Well, at that age a fatal fall can happen anywhere,” she said comfortingly. “It was just one of those things.”

“Yes, but you see, it was the very stone where I used to play,” Yoko repeated as she took the plate.

Mitani looked dubious. “Well, yeah, I suppose if you’d known ahead of time you could have done something about it, but what? Was it in a dangerous place?”

“No, that’s not what I was trying to say. I just meant that as a child I played innocently at the very place that years later would take my grandmother’s life. That’s all.”

“Okay . . . but you know what, the world’s a dangerous place for old folks. Don’t blame yourself.”

“I *don’t* blame myself. I mean, how could I? It’s just that . . .” Yoko paused, uncertain whether to continue, not having expected to encounter such difficulty in getting her point across. People at the other half

of the table, finding the large mound of late-night paella somewhat daunting, were discussing which Italian restaurant in Tokyo was the best. Yoko glanced over as if debating whether to join their discussion instead.

Makino poured red wine into Yoko's and Mitani's glasses, then his own, and waited for a moment before addressing Mitani. "I think Yoko is talking about memory."

Both women directed their gaze at him.

"Because her grandmother died at that stone, her memory of playing there as a child will never be the same. Isn't that right? In her mind, the two stones are one and the same. And as a result, that childhood memory has now become painful."

Yoko looked steadily at Makino, who was speaking quietly now, without his former ebullience. Her eyes shone with the pleasure of knowing someone understood.

But to Mitani, his explanation merely sowed new seeds of confusion. "Wouldn't her childhood memory be just that, a memory, with no connection to the future? At the time, it was just an ordinary stone. For her to play there without knowing what was going to happen years later was only natural."

"Yes, at the time. But after the loss of her grandmother, memories of playing at that stone would give rise to mixed feelings."

"Well, I don't get it. Yoko, is that what you meant?"

"I just realized it myself for the first time, listening to him explain."

Makino looked briefly at Yoko and then lowered his eyes.

Mitani was unsatisfied. "Yeah, but . . . I mean . . . What's the point? Sorry, it makes no sense to me."

"It's nothing. I'm sorry I brought up such a weird topic anyway." Yoko, realizing that Mitani was tipsy, tried to smooth things over. Makino, however, wasn't ready to let it go.

"It's not at all weird," he said. "Music is like that too. After you follow a musical theme to the end, looking back, what do you see? Beethoven's

diary contains a mysterious line: 'Ascertain all in the evening.' I forget offhand what the original German is. Yoko, you could probably help me there. Anyway, I think he meant something similar. Listening to a musical theme develop, you come to see that it contained a certain potentiality all along. Once you follow it to the end, the theme never sounds the same again. A bud that you look at knowing nothing of the flower to come isn't the same as the bud you look back on in memory with the flower before you. Music doesn't just progress forward in a straight line but works backward into the past as well. Without understanding that, you would never appreciate the fascination of the fugue."

He paused slightly before going on. "People think that only the future can be changed, but in fact, the future is continually changing the past. The past can and does change. It's exquisitely sensitive and delicately balanced."

Yoko was nodding as she listened, one hand pressing her long black hair against her neck. "This moment is no exception," she said. "From the vantage point of the future, it's exactly that, exquisitely sensitive and delicately balanced." After a pause, she said, "But I'm not sure how helpful this way of thinking really is. It's a little frightening to me, actually. Tonight has been so enjoyable. I wish it could go on forever."

Makino didn't reply, but his expression showed he agreed. The pleasure of having someone understand sank deep inside him, made him ecstatic. This was not something he was used to by any means.

Mitani, apparently still unconvinced, turned her attention woozily to the conversation at the other end of the table. From then until the restaurant closed at two thirty, Makino and Yoko were absorbed in a private conversation.

She looked into the flame of the candle on the table. "You did apologize, didn't you? To the man on the bullet train, I mean."

Makino stared. Then, thinking once again—how many times now?—how much he was enjoying this evening, he smiled. "Well, sure. Who wouldn't? But it makes a better story to say I got angry."

“I thought so.”

“How did you know?”

“I don’t know . . . I just did.” She smiled too.

Still smiling, Makino looked down, then raised his head again. “There’s one other thing that only you caught.”

“What’s that?”

Tonight’s concert was a dud, he started to say, but then thought better of it. He had expected to spend the night with the bitter aftertaste of disappointment, but thanks to her, that had changed. No need to spoil the evening now.

“Never mind. Sorry. It’s okay—it’s nothing.”

“What is it?”

“Just . . . something unimportant.”

She seemed to have some notion of what he meant. Her face expressed her dissatisfaction, but she didn’t press the issue.

More than once they surreptitiously checked their watches, realizing how late it was getting but pretending otherwise, prolonging the evening all they could. Finally, the others began suggesting it was time to leave. Mitani was asleep in her chair.

“She must be exhausted, after the strain of the concert. I hope she didn’t mind what I said.” Yoko looked at her, concerned.

“It’s all right. When she gets an idea in her head, she won’t let it go, but her stubbornness helps me. She’s a really solid person.”

Promising to keep in touch, they drifted out of the restaurant with the others. After helping Yoko into a taxi, Makino watched through the window as she gave instructions to the driver, his eyes on her profile. The daughter of Jerko Solich. Someone who for twenty years had never forgotten a concert he’d given at age eighteen . . .

Then she turned and looked back at him.

Impossible as it seemed at the time, afterward they each felt separately that they could have spent the remainder of the night together, that the option had been real. As their relationship developed, the long night of their first encounter came back to them frequently in memory as something special. The moment of that lingering last look was indeed “exquisitely sensitive and delicately balanced.” Amid the swirling rapids of time’s ceaseless rush downstream to the past, it shone with a soft and lonely light—while beyond lay the vast ocean of oblivion. Every time they were wounded in the future, again and again they would return in memory to look into each other’s eyes, embraced by the darkness of that night.

*would not fail again . . . standing on the once-more silent
carpet, those lovers wreathed now in true smiles.*

He came to the edge of the pond, which reflected the deep green all around, and in his eagerness and anxiety kept changing his grip on the handle of his guitar case. He walked along, his eyes searching wide across the space before him. Just off the path curving gently around the pond, he saw a bench in a shady spot straight ahead.

He stood still. Watching the desultory play of the afternoon light on the surface of the pond was a woman, seated alone on the bench. She slowly turned her face toward him.

He looked at her and smiled. Yoko started to respond, but it was all she could do to maintain her composure. She stood up, purse in hand, and turned again to face him. He was already walking toward her. His figure grew bigger as she watched. With reddened eyes, she finally smiled too. Five and a half years had passed since the smiles they exchanged the night they first met.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without the cooperation of many people, for which I am deeply grateful. Classical guitarist Shin-ichi Fukuda in particular made himself available from the very beginning, when the novel was still in the planning stage, and I am greatly in his debt. Guitarists Daisuke Suzuki and Yasuji Ohagi also gave me advice.

Concerning Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, I did the translation myself (using the text *Werke in drei Bänden* by Rainer Maria Rilke, Horst Nalewski, ed., Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1978) under the supervision of the German literary scholar Yoshikazu Takemine. I of course am alone responsible for any infelicities.

In addition, the following associations and individuals gave me valuable input: the Japan Association for Refugees, the Association of Nagasaki Hibakusha and Their Testimonies, Jean-Marc Mojon, Robert Campbell, and Kanae Doi, Japanese representative to Human Rights Watch, the international nongovernmental organization.

Finally, in the course of gathering information about Iraq, I had the unparalleled chance to sit down with the late freelance journalist Kenji Goto for long talks about his experiences covering global conflict. My description of Jalila's refugee experience is largely drawn from his

December 11, 2004, report in the *Independent Press* entitled “Pari no Irakujin josei” (An Iraqi woman in Paris). It pains me more than I can say that I can never deliver this book to Goto, who was eagerly looking forward to its completion. On January 30, 2015, he was executed by Islamic State militants. Rest in peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Mikiya Takimoto

Keiichiro Hirano is an award-winning and bestselling novelist whose debut novel, *The Eclipse*, won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1998, when he was a twenty-three-year-old university student. A cultural envoy to Paris appointed by Japan's Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Hirano has lectured throughout Europe. Widely read in France, China, Korea, Taiwan, Italy, and Egypt, Hirano's novels include the Watanabe Junichi Literary Prize-winning novel *At the End of the Matinee*—a runaway bestseller in Japan—and the critically acclaimed and Yomiuri Prize for Literature-winning *A Man*. His short fiction has appeared in the *Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*. For more information, visit <http://en.k-hirano.com> and follow Hirano on Twitter at @hiranok_en.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Photo © 2014 Toyota Horiguchi

Juliet Winters Carpenter is a veteran translator and professor emerita of Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts in Kyoto. Her first translated novel, *Secret Rendezvous* by Kobo Abe, received the 1980 Japan-US Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. In 2014, *A True Novel* by Minae Mizumura received the same award as well as the American Translators Association Lewis Galantière Award. The audio edition of her translation of Shion Miura's bestselling novel *The Great Passage* won an Earphones Award. Carpenter's other recent translations include *An I-Novel* by Minae Mizumura and *Pax Tokugawana: The Cultural Flowering of Japan, 1603–1853* by Toru Haga. She lives on Whidbey Island in Washington.