THE INVESTIGATION

JUNG-MYUNG LEE

TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN
BY CHI-YOUNG KIM

MANTLE

First published 2014 by Mantle
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-76871-0

The Daesan Foundation supported the translation
and publication of this book.

The List of Sources on page 327 constitutes
an extension of this copyright page.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

THINGS LONG GONE FLICKER LIKE FIREFLIES

Life may not have a purpose. But death requires clarity – not to prove that death occurred, but for the benefit of those who survive. This lesson, which I learned this past winter, made me who I am now. War had whipped me like a sandstorm. Somehow, even as I was worn down, eroded, I grew up, little by little. One might be congratulated for maturing, for the body becomes stronger and one accumulates experience; but to get here I'd lost so much. I am unable to return to who I'd been before, when I was unaware of the world's cruelty, the evil among us or the power inherent in a written line.

The war ended on 15 August 1945. The prisoners were freed, but I'm still here. The only thing that's changed is that now I am behind bars, my brown guard uniform exchanged for this red prisoner's garb. Dark numbers are printed clearly on my chest: D29745. I don't entirely understand why I'm here. During the war I was stationed as a soldier-guard at Fukuoka Prison. Now the Americans have classified me as a low-level war criminal. I am incarcerated in the very cell I once patrolled, in this immense prison of tall brick walls, sharp barbed wire, thick bars and the brick rooms that swallowed the lives of thousands.

Pale sunlight falls on the dark wooden floor, which not long ago was soaked with blood and pus. With a finger, I scrawl down some words in the rectangular patch of light, as though I were writing on paper. My muscles are firm, my skin is smooth, my blood is red, but my eyes have seen too much brutality. I'm only twenty.

The American military has charged me with the abuse of prisoners. I suppose it's a logical accusation; even I wouldn't say I'm innocent. I've abused prisoners, sometimes on purpose, at other times without even realizing it. I've yelled at them and beaten them. I have to accept responsibility for that. But I'm guiltier still of something else: the crime of doing nothing. I didn't prevent the unnecessary deaths of innocent people. I was silent in the face of the insanity. I closed my ears to the screams of the innocent.

The story I'm about to tell isn't about me; it's about the war's destruction of the human race. This story is about both the people who lacked humanity and the purest of men. And it's about a bright star that crossed our dark universe 10,000 years ago. I don't really know where this story will start or how it will end, or whether I can even finish it. I will just write it all down. My story is about two people who met at Fukuoka Prison. In my narrow cell I remember their lives behind the tall, firm brick wall, on the sun-soaked yard and under the shadows of the tall poplars. One prisoner and one guard; one poet and one censor.

PART ONE

AS A STRANGER I ARRIVED, AS A STRANGER AGAIN I LEAVE

The bell clanged, ripping through the dawn air. What happened? Had there been a prison break? I sprang up from the hard bed in the guardroom. It was still dark outside. I tightened my boot laces as the lights flickered on in the long corridor.

An urgent voice rang out over the crackling speakers. 'All guards report to your cells and begin roll call. Report anything unusual immediately. The guard on patrol duty for Ward Three, stand by at the entrance to the main corridor!'

Two guards manned the overnight rounds, which began at exactly 10 p.m. It took an hour and fifty minutes to check each cell on both sides of the long corridor and to inspect the locks. Shift change was at midnight, two and four in the morning. Sugiyama Dozan, with whom I worked, was a veteran over forty years old. When I'd returned to the guardroom after the 2 a.m. rounds, he was perched on the bed, tightening his gaiters. He'd left the room without a word, his club fastened to his hip. As he disappeared into the darkness, his back looked indistinct, ghostly. My eyelids, heavy with fatigue, had tugged me down into the black swamp of sleep – sleep that was now shattered.

I forced my tired eyes open and sprinted down the main

corridor leading to the guard offices. Big dogs were barking in the darkness beyond the red-brick walls. The spotlight from the watchtower sliced through the night like a sharp blade. The urgent shouts of the guards outside reached my ears. On either side of the narrow corridor prisoners looked out through the bars of their cells, bleary eyes ripe with annoyance and resentment. The guards threw open the cell doors to conduct the roll call. Voices calling out prisoner numbers and the prisoners' responses swirled with the alarm. I ran, chased by the thudding of my own boots. I skidded to a stop in the main corridor of Ward Three. What I saw made me want to escape into a dream. It was worse than a nightmare. Reddish-black blood was splattered on the main corridor, making a sunburst pattern. It was still falling from the second-floor railing. The body was hanging naked from a rope wrapped around a crossbeam on the ceiling. His arms were open at his sides and tied to the railing. Blood dripped from the left side of his chest, down his stomach and thigh, and hung for a moment on the tip of his big toe before falling to the ground. His head was bowed. He was staring down at me. Sugiyama Dozan.

Goosebumps pricked my body. Death was something I'd never thought about; it wasn't a becoming topic for a nineteen-year-old. Although I was in uniform, I was still only a boy. I gagged a few times and wiped my wet eyes. Other guards were milling around in confusion, unable to decide whether to leave the corpse hanging over the main corridor or cut it down. I approached again and shone my torch on his face. His lips had been sealed. Seven neat, delicate stitches led from the lower to the upper lip and back. I forced myself to lock my rattling knees.

Head guard Maeda arrived, and the blood drained from

his face. He stuttered an urgent order: 'Take the body down, cover it and move it to the infirmary!'

Several guards ran up to the second floor to undo the knot and eased the corpse slowly to the ground. Two others brought a stretcher and quickly disappeared with the body.

'Who's the alternate patrol?' Maeda asked, looking around.

I stiffened to attention. 'Watanabe Yuichi! Patrol on duty.'

Maeda threw me a sharp glance and shouted at me. Overwhelmed by the sour odour of vomit and the bright searchlight slicing the darkness, I couldn't hear anything other than the siren from the outer watchtower and the barking of the guard dogs.

The guard who had been searching the building entrance ran back in. 'About half a foot of snow fell overnight, but there isn't a single footprint anywhere; nobody has entered or left this building.'

That much was obvious. There were no puddles of melted snow or wet footprints around the crime scene. Where did the murderer come from? Where did he go?

A senior guard tapped me on the shoulder. I came to my senses. He relayed Maeda's order to gather Sugiyama's belongings and prepare an incident report. I ran up the stairs to the second floor. Flung to the ground next to the railing was his uniform. Sugiyama always had every button fastened. The uniform was his skin; without the uniform he was nothing. Now the arms and legs were inside out, the buttons were missing. I noticed that his uniform top didn't have any cuts in it. The murderer had taken off his uniform before hanging him. Only then had he driven a long, steel stake into Sugiyama's heart. His trousers, with worn, baggy knees, had been tossed carelessly aside, but crisp pleats still ran down the middle of each leg. Sugiyama

had stitched his pockets closed to ensure that he didn't slide his hand into them; the neat needlework was the secret to his composed gait.

I reached into the inner pocket of the uniform top and trembled like a boy reaching into a warm bird's nest. My fingertips touched something like a baby bird's feather – a piece of coarse paper folded twice over. I unfolded it. The words, nestled together to create small villages, whispered to me:

Good Night

As a stranger I arrived,
As a stranger again I leave.
May was kind to me
With many bunches of flowers.
The girl spoke of love,
Her mother even of marriage,
Now the world is bleak,
The path covered by snow.

I cannot choose the time
Of my departure;
I must find my own way
In this darkness.
With a shadow cast by the moonlight
As my travelling companion
I'll search for animal tracks
On the white fields.

Why should I linger, waiting
Until I am driven out?

Let stray dogs howl
Outside their master's house;
Love loves to wander
God has made her so
From one to the other.
Dear love, good night!

I will not disturb you in your dreaming,
It would be a pity to disturb your rest;
You shall not hear my footsteps
Softly, softly shut the door!
On my way out I'll write
'Good Night' on the gate,
So that you may see
That I have thought of you.

Each line exuded grief and despair, and an intense love; each stanza recalled a sad man walking away on a snow-covered night road. I examined the note carefully – the spot of ink that had spread where the pen had stopped, hesitating; the shape of the clumsy, rapid or slow strokes; the small changes of indentation from pen pressing against paper. Did he write this poem or did he simply copy someone else's? If this hand wasn't his, whose was it? Did someone plant this note, and why was this poem in Sugiyama's inner pocket?

Before I speak about Sugiyama Dozan's death again, I should talk about his life. I had spent three months in Ward Four before being transferred to Ward Three a mere three days

prior to his death. I knew next to nothing about him. He didn't become a ghost in death; to me, he'd been one when he was alive. He would pace the corridor in Ward Three under the incandescent lights, his footsteps measured, holding the register in one hand. When he did so, the prisoners quieted and studied his back from the safety of their cells. His pale skin was almost transparent and his face was as cold as a plaster bust. He never spoke, his mouth like Ali Baba's cave that had forgotten how to open. Once in a blue moon a flat, hoarse voice would leak out through his dry lips. He didn't need to yell; he knew how to strike fear into someone with his soft voice. His cleanly shaven chin was dark blue under his crooked nose. The guards gossiped about who could possibly have crushed his nose – a legendary left-handed *yakuza*, a tall Soviet soldier he'd encountered at Nomonhan, or perhaps shrapnel from a shell that exploded right next to him or the butt of a Soviet Type-99 Arisaka rifle. But nobody knew the truth. His cap settled low on his brow, hiding his eyes. A reddish scar ran down his face to his lips and glistened in the sunlight. Not many people knew where the scar began; it might have stretched past his eye all the way up to his forehead.

Sugiyama was omnipresent. He was where he had to be and he did what he had to do. He was so skilful that it was as if nothing ever happened. Everyone knew his name – guards and prisoners, Japanese and Korean – and feared and scorned it. I don't mean to repeat tall tales simply to cast him in a more interesting light. But if I had to say anything about him, I think it would be best to start with those stories.

Sugiyama was assigned to Fukuoka Prison in the summer of 1939. The warden had high expectations for the Manchurian

Front hero; he hoped the arrival of a proper military mindset would remedy the chaos in the prison. According to hearsay, Sugiyama was a sergeant in the Kwantung Army in Manchuria – the 64 Brigade of the 28th Infantry Regiment. He fought without understanding why, and witnessed his comrades dying. At one point his company was surrounded by the Soviet 9th Mechanized Corps. The Imperial Japanese Army's Division Headquarters gave orders to each unit to break through the siege and retreat eastwards. Sugiyama lay in ambush all day with thirty men and, when the shelling stopped at night, launched an attack on the Soviet tank division. After two weeks of isolation they managed to break through the siege and retreat. He was practically the sole survivor to emerge from the fire pit that saw the demise of thirty tanks, 180 aeroplanes and 20,000 troops.

Nobody knew if that story was true. All that could be confirmed was that the Kwantung Army's 28th Infantry Regiment battled with Soviet-Mongolian forces in Nomonhan. Facts stood here and there throughout the story to give plausible support to his heroic exploits. The guards talked about the battle as though they had actually witnessed it. There was a guard who said he had seen seven bullet wounds on Sugiyama's body. One guard claimed that Sugiyama was completely deaf in his left ear because a bomb had exploded right next to him. Another insisted that there was a fist-sized piece of shrapnel embedded in Sugiyama's torso. These rumours were laid over his reticence, creating a sheen of truth.

A few guards were actual witnesses to another story. When Sugiyama arrived at the prison, he had a slight limp from a gunshot wound to his right leg. His beard was unkempt and his eyes glinted like those of a wild animal.

He seemed to view this isolated prison as a new battlefield; though there was no enemy, he regarded everyone as the foe. He brandished his club freely, not letting a single action or word by a prisoner go unchecked. He was vicious and crafty. The prisoners feared him and the guards avoided him. Overnight he gained even more notoriety, thanks to the way he addressed a Korean prisoner riot.

Three Korean prisoners had locked themselves in the prison workshop, convinced some student draft-dodgers to join them and gone on a rampage. They took three Japanese prisoners hostage and demanded that the warden grant all the rioters prisoner-of-war status. Although such incidents were to be reported to the Special Higher Police, the warden chose not to; he considered the confines of the red-brick walls to be his territory. Calling the Special Higher Police to the prison would be a humiliation. He opened the armoury and distributed rifles to the guards. That was when Sugiyama stepped up, offering to enter the workshop to subdue the rioters. The warden just stared at him. Sugiyama took off his uniform top and told the warden to storm the doors with armed guards if he didn't re-emerge in ten minutes. He stepped inside as though he were being sucked in. The doors closed quietly behind him. The warden kept his eyes locked on the clock; the long, thin second hand sliced his heart with fine strokes. Five minutes passed. The guards' sweaty palms began to slip against their rifles. The warden prepared to enter, bracing himself for the loss of life. At that moment they heard a crash emanating from inside, along with faint screams. The guards pushed through the doors. Sugiyama was standing on a tall worktable with his club by his side. On the floor were men with bleeding heads, torn lips and swelling eyes, squirming like insects.

This story might be an exaggeration, too, but it was true that Sugiyama had gone alone into the rioters' den, and an undeniable fact that he came out without a scratch. After that incident, he resumed his shadowy existence. He was someone who existed through rumours alone. Only after he died did I explicitly feel his presence. And only then did I realize I really knew nothing about him.

Giant steel doors and a looming brick wall guarded the main entrance to Fukuoka Prison. The central facilities looked like a person prone, with the head facing the north and both arms outstretched. Fukuoka Prison had been a regional prison until three years before, when it was elevated to national status. With the Pacific War the country fell into chaos. Anti-war intellectuals and criminals ran wild, beyond the reach of the police. The prison was extended repeatedly, but still it couldn't handle the massive influx of prisoners. But the authorities had deemed it necessary to have internment facilities to isolate the anti-Japanese Koreans, who were quick to erupt with complaints, and decided on Fukuoka Prison, away from the heart of the country.

The administrative offices, including the warden's office, were sited in the central facilities. Japanese prisoners who were accorded special treatment were held in Ward One. Wards Two and Three split off at the end of the administrative wing. In Ward Two were vicious murderers or robbers, and long-term prisoners. Ward Three was reserved for anti-Japanese Korean rebels and death-row inmates. Lesser Japanese criminals were held in Wards Four and Five, which were added onto Ward Three to the west.

Despite the additions, the prison still overflowed with inmates. Ward Three in particular teemed with incidents, accidents and trouble. Prisoners went on hunger strikes, violence was frequent and executions were common. These Koreans were determined to be the most vicious, dangerous inmates and they were treated accordingly. The most robust and strongest guards were assigned there and every order was given with the swing of a club. Countless prisoners were beaten to death.

The dark scent of tobacco and mahogany washed over me as I stood at attention in the warden's office. The bracing morning air came through the open window. An award certificate stamped with the Emperor's royal seal was hanging on the wall and underneath it, side by side, were the crest of the samurai and the Rising Sun. A long military knife and a gleaming rifle were displayed on a solid-wood cabinet. Warden Hasegawa, whose balding pate was ringed with a thatch of hair, waved a long baton as though it were an extension of his body, his eyes closed. His chestnut-brown trousers were sharply creased and badges flashed on his chest. A man's powerful, elegant singing, edged with sadness, reverberated in the room. A record was spinning on the phonograph, which stood on a table draped with red velvet. The warden's office, complete with elegant floor-to-ceiling windows, sonorous singing and blinding morning sun, was a sanctuary. I had no idea that such a plush space existed in this drab brick building. Hasegawa picked up the needle and the phonograph's crackling halted. Stroking his neatly trimmed moustache, he seemed to revel in the music's lingering resonance.

'Watanabe Yuichi, Ward Three, sir!'

Hasegawa moved the baton to his other hand and stood up. The thoughtful middle-aged man enjoying a mellifluous song quickly transformed into a cold prison warden, his smile stiffening and his eyes emitting a chill. 'I already heard all about the dead guard, from Maeda.'

I wondered why he'd called me in. That was when it dawned on me – I was the last person who had seen Sugiyama alive. I clenched my molars to still my trembling lips.

'Are you a student-soldier?' His voice, as sharp as a hawk's talons, sank into me as if I were a field mouse.

Was I a suspect? 'Yes, sir. I was a liberal-arts student at the Third High School in Kyoto.'

'Lucky fellow. Your friends who were conscripted at the same time would have been sent to the Southern Front. You were assigned in Japan – to a prison, at that – not even to a military battalion.' His eyes glinted as he appraised me. 'You'll take this incident.'

Did he mean I should take care of the funeral? Or was he accusing me of the murder? It would have been preferable to go to the Southern Front. 'I will report the murder to the Special Higher Police,' I managed to squeak.

Hasegawa nodded and looked at me with his piercing gaze. 'Right. That would be the standard procedure. But here in Fukuoka Prison we can't follow standard procedures. We have the most dangerous elements of the archipelago here – men who need to be eliminated from society, people who shouldn't have been born to begin with. You can't employ common sense with them. The military can't do anything with them, let alone the Special Higher Police. Everything that happens here is a battle, and we're the only ones equipped to deal with what goes on in here. So don't bring up the goddamn police again!'

There was nothing I could say in reply.

'Take over this investigation. Find out which criminal element killed Sugiyama Dozan and why. Get yourself immediately to the head guard's office and request assistance. He'll see to it that you don't have any difficulty with this investigation. He'll get you the documents you need and set up interrogations with the prisoners. I want to know immediately if anything new is revealed!'

I clacked my heels together and froze at attention, feeling lost. I gave him a military salute, turned around and left.

The guard office was at the end of the administrative ward, where Wards Two and Three split off. Behind the wooden door were the guardroom and the holding cell, a neutral space between the prisoners and the guards. At one end of the guardroom was a shabby office, sectioned off by temporary walls. I opened the crooked door. Water was boiling in the kettle on top of the rusty stove, tended to by Maeda, his dress-uniform cap pressed firmly over his eyebrows. He never took off that cap; it made him taller, covered his balding head, and cast an authoritative shadow over his close-set eyes, drooping eyebrows and flat nose. Nearing fifty, Maeda looked much older than his years; he'd spent his entire life trapped in the brown uniform, surrounded by people who'd reached the end of their lives. He nodded to me and murmured, 'So it's finally come to this.'

I wasn't sure if he was addressing me. 'Did you know Sugiyama-*san* would be killed?'

His face became impassive, as though a curtain had been drawn. He tossed a file onto his desk, the Ward Three shift report. He licked his finger and flipped through the document. 'I'm not the only one who thought something would

happen to him. I didn't know it would be in this horrible way . . .'

'What kind of shit was Sugiyama involved in?' I deliberately chose to call him by name, without the polite *-san*. That removed any suggestion of sympathy.

Maeda softened. 'When he came back from Nomonhan, he couldn't rid himself of his wartime habits. He treated prisoners as if they were enemies. He acted as if he were waging battle. I mean, someone had to. The prisoners here look submissive, but don't be fooled. They'll rip you apart if you give them the chance. Sugiyama became an animal, too.'

Outside, the wind blew through the gaunt spindle trees, creating a piping sound. The kettle on top of the stove stopped boiling; the fire was dying down.

'This isn't just a guard's death!' Maeda shouted suddenly. 'This is war. They've declared war! The murderer is here, somewhere. Let me tell you, Ward Three is a different beast. It's where the worst of the criminals go, the most vicious – Koreans, traitors and Communists. This place stinks of blood. They bare their fangs and rip into each other. If you aren't careful, you could end up just like Sugiyama.' His words dripped with hatred and derision.

The coal in the furnace crackled. I didn't know what he was talking about. I felt like a pilot who'd made an emergency landing in enemy territory, unsure of which direction I was facing. But I had to do my job. I picked up the file Maeda had tossed aside. I opened its worn, glossy cover. I inhaled the scent of sweet paper, losing myself for a moment in delicious ink and fragrant trees. The last entry was dated 22 December.

Guards usually scribbled 'nothing out of the ordinary'

instead of a detailed record of the day or, if even that proved too difficult, they wrote: 'N/A'. But Sugiyama's reports were notable for their detail. Even almost-identical events from the previous day were recorded slightly differently. On the night before he died he'd written: '349 prisoners sleeping in a total of 48 cells. Patrol time 2–6 a.m. 348 steps round-trip along Ward Three corridor. Many patients with colds. Slow recovery of one patient with contusions and fractures.' The previous day he'd written: 'From 2 to 6 a.m. checked 346 prisoners in 48 cells through the surveillance window. More patients with colds, one patient with fractures and contusions.' The patient with contusions and fractures was mentioned daily; I became curious about his identity and the source of his injuries. I flipped back, page by page. The first clue I found was in the 13 December report. 'Prisoner 331 in Cell 28: repressed with club for refusal of orders and inappropriate actions. Moved to infirmary after collapse, took emergency measures. Contusions all over the body including the head, suspected fracture to shoulder and ribs.' I was a little surprised that he'd faithfully recorded the conditions of the men he'd personally clubbed. I looked up 331's records. Name: Choi Chi-su. Crime: study of Communism and overthrow of the government, assassination attempt of a key government figure, rebellion plot. He was a long-term prisoner.

I stood up and adjusted my uniform. I wondered whether this man could illuminate the mystery of Sugiyama's death. But when Sugiyama was killed, all the prisoners were in their cells. Only guards and rats were awake and mobile. Still, 331 was the only person I could think of to question.

*

Later, under the faint shadow of the tall brick wall lining the yard, I studied the piece of paper I'd found in Sugiyama's uniform. Its worn corners were disintegrating, but it seemed to retain his body heat. I turned the paper over; it was a ledger of incoming and outgoing post for Ward Three. *27 March 1942. Incoming: 14; Outgoing: 5*. At the bottom the sender's name, address and the prisoner number of the recipient were written in black ink. The first hesitant stroke revealed a careful personality, while the following clumsy but sure strokes suggested a strong sense of purpose.

I believed handwriting revealed one's soul. The shape and position of the script announced not only a person's character and desires, but also his mood and feelings at the time he was writing, as did the space between the letters and lines and the speed with which he scrawled. Even a blank piece of paper tells the reader something about the person who chose not to write. As for the content – I was well aware of the magic of consonants as they ruptured in my mouth; of the elegance of vowels as they tumbled out fluidly; and of the way they created pitch and meaning and feeling as they mixed and crashed into each other. I recalled characters from novels I'd read long ago. The bleak prison yard became the snow-covered Siberia in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*; if I were to love someone, I would love a woman like Katyusha. If words could explain lives, why couldn't they illuminate death? I searched for Sugiyama's core in his strokes and punctuation, but I soon grew confused. I glimpsed two very different people. The exact same writing was on the shift report and the post ledger; the writer was confident and fearless, like the Sugiyama I was familiar with. Though the poem seemed written by the same hand, the strokes seemed bashful and hesitant. Did

Sugiyama write both the official reports and the poem, too? Or did someone copy Sugiyama's handwriting? And, most importantly, why was that piece of paper in his pocket?

THINGS THAT POOL IN THE HEART BEFORE TRICKLING DOWN

Darkness began to descend over the prison walls. Every afternoon at this time I heard the same seductive piano melody playing somewhere; I hummed along automatically. A light was on in the infirmary. Drawn by the music, I started walking towards it. I stopped at the auditorium window and looked in; a grand piano stood imposingly, as confident as a boat with expanded sails voyaging through the red sunset. Its colonnades, curves and the fine, elaborate carvings – it created an otherworldly effect. A woman was sitting at the piano, which let out a clear, delicate sound each time her fingers caressed the keys; I felt as though I'd seen the source of a majestic river, a small spring deep in the mountains. Her white fingers undulated like waves, scurried like mice and flitted like curious birds. In a trance, I gazed at this forbidding world from the other side of the clear glass. Time passed ever so slowly. She was like an exotic bird flying into the sunset, into darkness, into silence. As the air absorbed the last melodies, she straightened and looked out the window. Was she looking at me? I stared at her, bewitched; she was indeed real. She was wearing a neat white nurse's uniform; her slender face was as smooth as a ceramic pot; her hair glistened in the amber light of the

waning sun. Her high forehead, slender eyebrows and the corners of her almond-shaped eyes were enchanting, her cheeks were flushed, and her slightly parted lips prodded my curiosity.

I wanted to introduce myself, but my shabby appearance made me hesitate. I watched as she held a hairpin in her mouth before securing her nurse's cap. She glanced down at her reflection on the piano lid before taking her files and hurrying across the auditorium. With each step, her white skirt flapped at her calves. Before I realized what I was doing, I stepped into the building. I walked down the pristine corridor to the auditorium. The doors opened silently as though they had been waiting for me. I approached the glistening piano, awed by its black-and-white keys, the vibrant grain of the wood, its sturdy tendon-like strings. I looked down at the back of my cracked, rough hands, at my fingernails rimmed with grime. Could fingers this dirty make a melody? I pressed a key; a clear note rang out, thawing my heart. I closed my eyes.

'That's soh.' A voice twinkled like the scales of sweetfish swimming upstream. Hundreds of bells tolled in my ears.

I looked behind me. Her lips were pursed, but she didn't seem reproachful. She held black files against her chest, creating a vivid contrast against her white uniform. Her fingers were pale and long and delicate; her pinkish nails had a transparent lustre. How long had she been watching me?

'It's also called G. It's the fifth note. For your little finger. It's the arbiter of sound that harmonizes with all notes, a bridge that links the ponderous dark low notes and delicate high notes.' She looked me over.

I shrank. I was bedraggled; my uniform was covered in

dirt, my skin had been pummelled by dusty winds, my lips were blistered, I hadn't bathed in a while. She smiled slightly. Was she jeering silently at me? Or was it compassion?

'I'm sorry,' I said, stiffly. 'Coming in here without permission and touching this object . . .' I searched for a way to end the sentence. I wanted to bite my clumsy tongue for calling this enchanting, captivating instrument an object.

She said it was fine, that it wasn't her piano, and reached over to pick up the sheet music she'd left on the rack.

I mustered up the courage to speak to her again. 'The piece you just played – what is it called? I think I've heard it before, but I don't remember the title.'

Instead of answering, she opened the sheet music. The title was written on the top. *Die Winterreise*. 'It's German. Winter Journey.'

'Winter Journey . . .' I echoed.

'Schubert composed these lieder for Wilhelm Müller's poems. It's a total of twenty-four songs published as Opus 89. The singer tells of the loneliness of life and the pain of love, but even played with just the piano, it's truly beautiful. The piano in *Die Winterreise* doesn't merely accompany the singer. It sets the tone of the whole piece. I would say it's a duet of a pianist and a singer.'

'It makes me wonder which singer would be able to hold his own.'

'Professor Marui Yasujiro. He's the foremost tenor in Japan. He teaches at Tokyo Imperial University Music School and has made several records. He's renowned worldwide, especially for performing Schubert. To really express the loneliness and gloom of this piece, he sang it as a baritone. His performances are some of the best interpretations of Schubert's work.'

I was sufficiently awed, and it must have shown on my face.

'Professor Marui is planning to give a concert, wishing for peace in Asia, here next February,' the nurse told me. 'He decided not to use his usual accompanist for this concert; he wants someone working here. He thought that was more fitting with the themes of hope and peace. That's why I've been practising so hard.' She smiled, revealing her even teeth, which resembled the piano's white keys. 'I'm Iwanami Midori,' she said. Her words rippled like water and pooled in my heart.

'Watanabe – Yuichi . . .' I stammered, disgusted with myself that I couldn't utter my own name without stuttering.

She nodded before walking across the wooden floor.

'Iwanami Midori . . .' I murmured. Her name sounded like a melody.

It was snowing outside. The snow fell through the darkness, crackling like thin ice. The night air was heavy with ice and cold and heartlessness and conspiracies and secrets and other unknowable things. Our barracks formed a makeshift structure on the west side of the central facilities. By the time I returned, the lights were out and the other conscripted guards were deep in slumber. The coal stove glowed in the middle. I stumbled into my sleeping bag, which smelled of other people. It had been a long day. Sugiyama's death, searching for clues but learning nothing, the mysterious poem. I wasn't Sherlock Holmes or a Special Higher Police detective. I didn't have the skills to solve a gruesome murder, let alone the means to catch the perpetrator.

The wind swept the snow off the galvanized iron roof

above my head. The amber light, the warm air, the elegant piano, the girl in white . . . I folded my hands on my chest and felt the piece of paper that I'd retrieved from Sugiyama's uniform:

As a stranger I arrived,
As a stranger again I leave.
May was kind to me
With many bunches of flowers.
The girl spoke of love,
Her mother even of marriage,
Now the world is bleak,
The path covered by snow.

That violent guard wrote such poetry? It didn't match up. Was it a clue, or a sign left by the murderer? Why would a criminal leave a mysterious poem in the victim's pocket? I was as puzzled as ever, but grew convinced that the poem contained the key. The song I'd heard Midori playing earlier circled in my head – the song of one man's despair, of painful love. Melody embraced poetry, and poetry was laid over melody. The harmony of sounds layered over the verse; the tinkling of the piano sparkled in the golden light of the furnace. Three faces hovered in my mind – Sugiyama, Hasegawa, Midori. Poetry, melody, piano.

Before the war tore my life into pieces, my days began in a single-storey house topped with an attic in the outskirts of Kyoto, and proceeded to a small used bookshop run by my mother. I spent hours among the old wooden bookshelves piled with dust, surrounded by paper. Walls of books protected us from the ominous news of the war. Nothing

could filter in through the hundreds of thousands of pages; not the brawling of merchants or the clomping of marching soldiers or the cold of the winter night. The books protected me from the era's rebellions and from my anxiety about the future. I snuggled deeper in my prison-issue sleeping bag, recalling forgotten names, their faces as vivid as a new photograph – Fyodor Dostoyevsky, André Gide, Lord Byron, Rainer Maria Rilke.

We opened the bookshop the year I went into middle school. Three years earlier my father had applied to the Manchurian military academy, but he was too old. He was finally able to enrol after audaciously demonstrating his sincerity with a letter written in his blood and sent to the Army Minister. Early in the morning on the day of departure, my mother and I followed him to Kyoto Station. From behind, amid the plump flitting snowflakes, he looked like a wooden toy soldier, weighed down with gear. Thick, solid icicles clung to the dark wheels of the train that was puffing out white steam. Father's scratchy beard was caked with frost. His eyelashes were long, like mine.

'Yuichi, be good to your mother.' Father's frozen words mixed with his white breath, the whistle of the black train and the stomping of military boots. The crying of women fell away, buried by military song, as Father walked slowly into the black steel monster.

Mother rented a small shop front, installed bookshelves and hung up a white tin sign. A few strands of hair kept falling across her forehead. I bought her a butterfly pin as a fulfilment of Father's last request. At the front of the shop Mother repaired torn covers with thick paste, replaced missing covers with stiff strawboard, restitched unravelled bindings and re-created ripped spines with silk cloth. Books

ruined beyond salvation ended their lives there, becoming kindling or a sack containing warm roasted sweet potatoes on a winter night, or the paper with which to wipe a young child's nose. Even after the books died, their sentences lived and breathed. Plato's wisdom printed across a sack of sweet potatoes might attract the attention of a poor student; Dumas's words might move the father who wiped his young son's nose, prompting him to unfold the sticky sheet.

Our days began and ended in that small bookshop. Every day at dawn we went there, stepping through the chilly air. When we opened the locked glass door, the stale smell of books rushed at us in greeting. After school I returned to the cradle of books. Mother was at the front counter greeting customers while at the back, among the narrow bookshelves, I stamped the inside of each book with our shop's seal, like a cowboy branding a calf, to welcome the books into our family. I sneezed from the dust, sliced my fingers on the sharp pages and bruised myself with the heavy corners, but I was happy. I organized the books by field and subject and displayed popular books at the front; each and every book became a world of its own. Universes were organized on the shelves according to my will. I exerted absolute control according to my own order and rules, putting Tolstoy's essays on the same shelf as Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and a yellowed copy of *Othello* next to *King Lear*. Soon I could guess the age of a book just by its scent and understand a book's core from a quick glance at the table of contents, like a farmer who could tell the maturity and sweetness of a fruit from just its colour and the texture of its skin. I could conjure up people's interests by taking in their expressions as they entered through the glass door. Most of the time I handed them the books they

asked for, but sometimes, when they sought books I wanted to keep forever, I didn't – *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*; a book of Van Gogh's paintings in colour; *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. When the customers turned away in disappointment, I felt both guilty and secretly thrilled.

A maze of books beckoned at me from the back of the shop. I hid in the sewers of Paris on the eve of revolution and met a woman in snowy, frigid Siberia. I ventured into the world of heroes and gods and visited a lone island where a dethroned prince was imprisoned. Books were cities I'd never visited, filled with pillars of great thoughts and streets of phrases, mazes of abstruse sentence structures and alleys of complicated syllables. They were stores that displayed a wide range of things, punctuation twinkling like the crest of a venerable family, sentences breathing peacefully, words whispering. I returned to reality when the roof of the Temple of the Golden Pavilion shimmered from far away and the sky turned orange. As darkness descended, Mother closed the doors. The world of sentences sank into the night, the heroes and kings and ladies mourning lost love falling asleep. On our way home Mother looked lonely; I would make endless conversation, asking about the books that had been sold that day, who bought them and what they were about. I was always pleasantly surprised when Mother gave me detailed answers about what she'd read long ago, or books she'd wanted to read but hadn't got round to. Mother sometimes laughed, although her laughter was always hollow. I knew I couldn't take on her loneliness or her exhaustion; I could almost smell Father's cigarettes and sweat and faint sorrow. Like a drawing in sand, Father's face eroded with time. We didn't receive a single letter from him. Eventually I found myself

no longer waiting for him to write, no longer pining for his return. I forgot him; I had to forget him first, so as not to be forgotten myself. I didn't want to waste my whole life hoping for a miracle.

Mother was lonely and I was withdrawn, but we weren't unhappy. That fortress of books was our refuge. I discovered this only a long time later, but it was also the price of my father's life, what he'd given us when he walked into the war zone in Manchuria. I might have been a little less sad if I'd never known that. But the timing of everything is always off. Man is in pain because he finds love too early, because he hasn't seen someone for too long and because he discovers the truth too late.