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*Hosea Hirata, "Haruki Murakami in Princeton", *The Gest Library Journal* 5, no. 1 (1992): 10-25, accessed May 12, 2025, http://eal.lib.princeton.edu/EALJ/hirata_hosea.ealj.v05.n01.p010.pdf*

Haruki Murakami in Princeton

HOSEA HIRATA

“Let’s go look for the sheep,” she said, eyes closed. “Once we get to looking for that sheep, things’ll fall into place.”

I looked into her face a while, then I gazed at both her ears. A soft afternoon glow enveloped her body as in an old still life.

— A Wild Sheep Chase

HARUKI APPEARS WITH YŌKO

Early in February 1991, late in the evening, I met Haruki (his first name) for the first time. It wasn’t like a planned meeting in a fashionable cafe (there is no such thing in Princeton); I just landed in front of him, so to speak. It was dark. The ground was wet and slippery. Someone who had gone to pick him up at the airport knocked on our apartment door. I ran out, slipped, fell, stood up, and found myself in front of him. It was dark and he looked like a bundled up sheep — quiet, compact, but somehow dense and massive. Then I understood completely the *raison-d’être* of the enigmatic sheep in his novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*.¹ Yōko, his long-time companion (he sometimes refers to his wife in this way in his essays), who looked like his graceful shadow in her black suit, with her long black hair cascading into the darkness around her, was already asking us where the laundry room was.

So it seemed that he just appeared one night in Princeton, thousands of miles away from his homeland Japan, materialized, as it were, out of millions of words he had shaped and exhibited in more than forty books he had published in Japan. He is our department’s (East Asian Studies) visiting fellow for a year.



1. Haruki Murakami in a Jones Hall classroom, Princeton University, 1991

HARUKI IS VERY POPULAR

Without a doubt Haruki is by far the most phenomenally successful writer of “serious literature” (*jun bungaku*) in modern Japan. His books have sold by the millions, forcing him to be some kind of cultural icon of contemporary Japan. Although Haruki attempts to avoid Japan’s omnipresent media publicity as much as possible, his fame has reached such a point that he and Yōko could no longer feel anonymous and free in public places. In 1986 they actually left Japan for Europe and lived in Greece and Italy for three years. The visit to Princeton is therefore their second long foreign sojourn. Yet despite all the hype and hoopla in Japan, he remains an absolutely unassuming and very private individual.

There seem to be innumerable theories floating around attempting to account for Haruki’s “phenomenal” popularity in Japan. One thing seems clear: his books have spoken for a new generation, *our* generation, defining *our* language, just as a decade before Ōe Kenzaburō and Abe Kōbō offered a new language to the generation of existentialists unsatisfied with the peculiar Japanese aesthetics shaped by the works of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Kawabata Yasunari, and Mishima Yukio. We have seen that many of the postwar Japanese writers began writing out of an existentialist vacuum left by the war. Haruki, on the other hand, began writing out of the vacuum of the seventies, left empty by the collapse of a counterculture led by students’ revolutionary movements in the late sixties. His writings could be seen as struggles against the ever threatening, all-engulfing silence in which we pretend to communicate, from which he *writes*.

We walked through the woods to the ICU campus, sat down in the student lounge, and munched on hot dogs. It was two in the afternoon, and Yukio Mishima’s picture kept flashing on the lounge TV. The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it didn’t matter to us one way or the other. A student got up on a chair and tried fooling with the volume, but eventually he gave up and wandered off.

“I want you,” I said.

“Okay,” she said.²

HARUKI WAS BORN

Murakami Haruki was born in 1949 in Ashiya, Hyogo — the city made

famous by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's masterpiece *The Makioka Sisters*. He grew up as an only child. Both his parents were Japanese literature teachers in high school (his mother quit work after Haruki was born). Out of youthful rebellion against his parents, Haruki says, he decided not to read any Japanese literature; instead, he began reading cheap American paperbacks easily obtainable in the port town Kobe's secondhand bookstores. In 1968, as he entered the Theater Department at Waseda University, he moved to Tokyo for the first time. Within a few weeks in Tokyo he observed his native Kansai (Western) dialect become transformed into standard Tokyo speech. Consequently, all his writings were to be written in the standard Tokyo dialect — an alien language for Haruki.

The late sixties in Japan saw the height of student uprisings. Many universities were occupied by leftist students and were forced to close down. Waseda University was no exception. Haruki hardly went to school, though he met Yōko in a German class he mistakenly wandered into. They were married in 1971 while both of them were still students. In 1974 they opened a jazz bar. Moving it once to a different location within Tokyo, they managed the bar until 1981 when Haruki decided to make a living solely by his writing. He graduated from Waseda in 1975.

HEAR THE WIND SING

So it was that when I learned of her death, I smoked my six thousand, nine hundred and twenty-second cigarette.³

This book was published in 1979 but I wrote it in 1978. I began writing it in April. When I went to see a baseball game in the nearby Jingu Ballpark — it was the season-opener by the way — it just came to me that I should write a novel. It was a beautiful day. I was lying on the ground beyond the outfield (there were no bleachers back then), drinking beer, then suddenly felt an urge to write. So I went to the Shinjuku Kinokuniya Bookstore and bought myself a fountain pen and some writing paper. I was twenty-nine then. Before that I was too busy at the jazz bar to write anything. I even had no desire to write, though I liked reading books. I was working till late every night so that I could pay back all the debts that I'd needed to start the business.

First I wrote the whole thing (200 pages) in a normal realist

style; but somehow it didn't work. The story was the same as the final version. But the realist style made the story really boring. So I thought I would make the style much lighter. It's true that this new style of writing was much influenced by writers like Richard Brautigan and Kurt Vonnegut. How to transplant their styles into the Japanese language was the crucial point.

So I began rewriting it from the beginning. I don't remember clearly how I proceeded to rewrite except that I kept the same story line. When I was working on a figure of speech, for example, I decided that I would not use any similies that the mainstream realist writers might use. I just decided that I would write it like a joke. Then I felt all the muscles in me move in harmony, so to speak. I felt "This is it!"

Of course I had to keep working at the bar. After closing the bar, I wrote about an hour every night on the kitchen table at home, sipping beer. It was fun. This is one of the reasons that the chapters are very short. If I'd had to work with long chapters, I couldn't have remembered what I was feeling the night before.

I remember well the day when one of the editors of the *Gunzō Journal* told me that *Hear the Wind Sing* had made it to the final cut for the award. That was a Sunday morning in early spring. I'd already turned thirty. By then I had even forgotten that I had sent in the manuscript for the New Writer's Award. (It was autumn when I sent the manuscript.) So, when I was told over the phone that it was among the finalists, I was really flabbergasted. Then I felt so happy. I have experienced many moments of happiness since I became a writer but I've never felt so much joy as at that moment. Even the joy of receiving the actual award paled in comparison. After I hung up the phone, I went out for a walk with my wife. We found a pigeon with a broken wing in front of a school. I held it in my hands and took it to a police station. The pigeon was palpitating in my hands. I clearly remember that faint sign of life and its warmth. It was an obscure kind of spring morning. The air was full with the aroma of precious life. I just felt that I would win the award. Just a hunch.

And I really won the award.



2. Haruki Murakami, Princeton University campus, 1991

Now I think I'm ready to talk.

Granted I haven't come up with one single solution to anything. For that matter, by the time I get through talking, things might be no different than when I started. When you get right down to it, writing is no means to self-help. It's scarcely a passing attempt at self-help. Still, it's awfully hard to tell things honestly. The more honest I try to be, the more the right words recede into the distance.

I don't mean to rationalize, but at least this writing is my present best. There's nothing more to say. And yet I find myself thinking that if everything goes well, sometime way ahead, years, maybe decades, from now, I might discover at last that these efforts have been my salvation. Then lo, at that point, the elephants will return to the plains and I will set forth a vision in words more beautiful.⁴

So began his writing career.

HARUKI WRITES MANY BOOKS

After *Hear the Wind Sing*, Haruki published five novels: *Pinball*, 1973 in 1980, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (winner of the Noma Literary Award for New Writers) in 1982, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (winner of the Tanizaki Prize) in 1985, *Norwegian Wood* in 1987, and *Dance, Dance, Dance* in 1988. He has also published six collections of short stories and more than a dozen of nonfiction writings, often in collaboration with illustrators or photographers, as well as translations of works by, among others, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Paul Theroux, Raymond Carver (he is translating the complete works of Carver), Tim O'Brien, John Irving. Most of his novels have already been translated into English by Alfred Birnbaum but are only now gradually coming out in the United States and the United Kingdom. The translations of his first two novels and *Norwegian Wood* are available only in Japan, included in the Kodansha English Library Series. (Haruki thinks his first two novels are too immature to be published here.) The translation of *A Wild Sheep Chase* was published in the United States and the United Kingdom in 1989 and now is in paperback. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, published by Kodansha International, came out in 1991. The *New Yorker* has published three short stories. *Playboy* is also scheduled to publish several of his stories.

“The phone will ring soon,” the TV PEOPLE rep says. Then, after a measured pause, he adds, “In another five minutes.”

I look at the telephone; I think about the telephone cord. Endless lengths of phone cable linking one telephone to another. Maybe somewhere, at some terminal of that awesome megacircuit, is my wife. Far, far away, out of my reach. I can feel her pulse. Another five minutes, I tell myself. Which way is front, which way is back? I stand up and try to say something, but no sooner have I gotten to my feet than the words slip away.⁵

INTERVIEW OR PARTY TALK

HH: Do you have a favorite among your works?

HM: Mmmm . . . I like some of my short stories. But I get too critical about my longer ones. You see, a finished long novel is like a piece of dirty underwear you just took off. When you are wearing it you don't mind, but once you took it off, you just don't feel like putting it back on again. When I write short stories, I leave some distance between myself and the text. There's always some conscious calculation involved in writing a short story.

HH: How about the story “The Disappearance of an Elephant”?

HM: Yeah, I like that one, too. I just like elephants. They are so big. I thought it would be interesting if such a big thing disappeared without any reason. So I began writing that story about why an elephant disappeared. Before that story, I wrote a very short one about an elephant stepping on beer cans. There's a small city and everyone recycles beer cans. The city decides to hire an elephant to crush the collected cans. The protagonist, “I,” just loves watching the elephant crushing the cans with its heavy feet. Once a week the elephant does the work. “I” just watches it. That's all. A very short story. After this I wrote the story about the disappearance of an elephant. The crux is that the elephant disappears. Other added parts of the story really don't matter. As long as the elephant disappears, I would be perfectly content.

HH: Do you learn much from translating?

HM: Oh, yes, a lot. To translate English into Japanese is really a matter of transferring a dynamism. You just can't keep chasing words; you have to capture the core of the text. So as long as I know that I have captured the

core of the text, regardless of some trivial mistakes I inevitably make, I feel great. The difficulty of translating poems is that you have to, in a way, capture the core within the core of the poem. That's really tough to do.

HH: Are there any American writers whom you feel are particularly difficult to translate?

HM: The more I like a writer the more difficult it gets to translate. For example, Scott Fitzgerald is difficult to translate because I like his work too much. Do you remember how *The Great Gatsby* begins? Oh, you found the book. Could you read it aloud for me?

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

You see, this is really tough. How can anyone translate the word "advantages" into Japanese? Reading it in English I think I know the "core" of the text. But it's really difficult to transfer this into Japanese. Although I would really love to translate this book, because of this sentence I can't do it.

HH: Isn't there already a Japanese translation of *Gatsby*?

HM: Yes, there is.

HH: You don't like it?

HM: Mmmmm . . . Well, it's like bumping into your old girlfriend dating another guy. It's not that I hate this translation by someone else, but, you know, you can feel some tension . . .

HH: What do you like about Fitzgerald?

HM: He carries the burden of duality. I like writers who have some kind of duality, people who seem to be somehow divided within. In the case of Fitzgerald, he had both an inferiority complex and a strong sense of superiority. Yes, in many other senses, he seemed to be divided: sincerity and wildness, idealism and debauchery. He would love Zelda completely but at the same time would ignore her completely. No wonder he became an alcoholic.

HH: In many of your works, the character "I" simply watches things around him. I wonder why.

HM: It might be very much like Nick Carraway watching *Gatsby*. You know, he is the narrator of the story. I really like Nick Carraway. He is just

an ordinary guy. You see, I myself do not feel that I am an “artist.” I am more like a worker in an artistic field. A true artist would create a strong, active first-person narrative because he’s more confident about himself. The world he sees would be as vivid as the world seen from a roller coaster. But in my case, it’s different. I just feel like watching things more quietly. I want to see different people, different movements. So, it’s not that I move; I watch things move. Murakami Ryū is the opposite kind of writer. He acts. I watch.

HH: What do you think of plots?

HM: I never think about a plot beforehand. I just begin. So I have no idea what is to follow. It’s like I am going through an unforeseeable adventure with the characters. It’s a lot of fun, actually. It would be really boring if I knew the story line beforehand. Inevitably some contradictions in the narrative show up when I proceed like this. Then, I have to edit later. I believe that writing a novel is basically a spontaneous act. It’s like you are going over a cliff by keeping on adding another piece of wood before you until you eventually cross over to the other side. Or it’s like a ninja walking on water by pulling out each leg before it sinks into the water. It’s really thrilling to write a novel like this. You just have to become a novelist to enjoy this thrill.

HH: How do you begin then?

HM: Well, I have to feel that something is overflowing within me. After finishing a long novel, I have to have a few years to prepare for another one. I have to wait till I know for sure that something is overflowing out of me. But if I wait too long, this something will totally submerge me, so I have to capture the right moment to begin. It’s quite mysterious, but I can feel that moment. I’m not sure but I think it may be very much like the brief period in a month when a woman can get pregnant. Once I begin writing I become very difficult to deal with. I think I’m usually a pretty helpful husband doing this and that in the house. But once I start on a long novel, I do absolutely nothing except to write.

HH: How long would that last?

HM: Three months.

HH: That’s pretty short.

HM: I can’t do it longer than that. My wife would kill me!

HH: After you began writing novels, did you feel that your relation to the world changed?

HM: Yes, it became more intimate. Writing novels is a bit like self-therapy to me in that sense. I can inscribe in a novel an image of myself which I think I should become, or which I should be but wasn't. It's like an experiment. By crossing two opposing images, one which I should become and the other I shouldn't be, the right image of myself becomes more visible. I believe that self-therapy is everyone's duty. Some people do it through sports, through love, through ambition, through money. I just do it through writing.

HH: Do you ever think of consciously changing your writing style?

HM: After a few similar attempts, yes, I try to change my style.

HH: Certainly your later works are quite different from your earlier ones. For example, one can say that *Norwegian Wood* is written in a more realistic style.

HM: Perhaps, realism. But personally I think that book is a fairy tale. I think, including myself, young people seek fairy tales. If a novel didn't carry you out of reality, it's useless. You see, let's say we go to a concert and they have four numbers in the program. If just one number out of the four really took us away to a different realm, I think we could go home feeling happy. A novel is very much like that. Even though there may be many shortcomings, if there is one passage that could carry the reader away, then I would call the work a success.

HH: What kind of novel would you like to read again and again? Do you seek identification with your favorite authors?

HM: For example, Fitzgerald. He definitely is not like me. I think the ideal relationship with the author is that he be a completely different person from what you are but you somehow understand what he wants to say. This is a mysterious thing. I can listen to Charlie Parker millions of times. But, let's see, okay, Jackie McLean, a great player on his own, but I don't think I can listen to him hundreds of times. After fifty listenings of his album, I think I would get tired. But I'm pretty sure I can listen to Charlie Parker more than a thousand times without ever getting tired. But you know there is a greatness in the Jackie McLean type, and a different greatness in the Charlie Parker type. They are just different. You can say the same thing about Bach and Dvořák. I must have read that opening page of *The Great Gatsby* more than a hundred times. Whenever I'm feeling upset at someone, I remember the passage "Whenever you feel like criticizing any one . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

HH: Would you like to try some other genres, like film-making, or poetry?

HM: Film-making wouldn't work for me because it requires collaboration. But I would love to write poetry, especially prose poems. Actually I've written one, an awful prose poem. It takes an epistolary form. It was quite long, addressed to someone I really detested. It was too bad nobody liked it because I liked it a lot. You know, when I finished writing it, it felt so good, having written absolutely awful things about this person.

HH: You are really good at depicting scenes with food and drinks. They make me want to eat and drink, too.

HM: When I write an eating scene, I'm always wishing that the reader would get hungry. When I write a sex scene, I'm hoping that the reader would literally get aroused. I believe that is the task of a novel. I often get letters from readers saying that they got really aroused by reading my novels. Those letters make me happy. A girl once wrote me that she was reading my novel until four in the morning and was suddenly seized by a strong urge to have sex. So she rushed to her boyfriend's apartment, pried open the window from outside, climbed into his room, and successfully had sex. Her letter made me happy. In response to my first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, I got letters saying that they just had to rush to a liquor store to buy some beer. I really love to hear this kind of practical response. I believe that a novel should make its readers feel like they got an extra gift thrown in, like in a candy box. I am not much interested in what is "artistic" about the novel. A novel should function more practically and effectively in our everyday reality. For example, some of the stuff I write is written simply in order to please my wife. When I know that she really likes what I wrote, then I feel that it was a good work. She becomes happy and does all sorts of nice things for me, cooking an elaborate meal and things. But of course this kind of euphoria doesn't last too long. The meals become quite ordinary in a week.

HH: What do you think of the role of ethics in literature?

HM: In Japanese literature, I think, more often than not ethics takes the form of self-punishment. "I" wants to live naturally but feels obliged by moral restriction; thus "I" goes through self-punishment. I believe that an ethics that would naturally grow outward was lacking in Japanese literature. What I mean is that we should think of ethics not as a restriction but something which helps to expand oneself. To give you an example, I do

lots of housework, not because I feel I should do housework, as if ordered by a certain “ethics,” but because I feel I can grow as a person by doing housework, cooking my own meals, washing dishes that I used, ironing the shirts I wear. This is very everyday stuff, but that is the notion of ethics I’m interested in.

HH: What do you think of the I-novel (“*shishōsetsu*”)?

HM: I think the I-novel has potential. It’s just that I-novel writers didn’t exploit the genre’s own possibilities to the full. It’s related to ethics again. They failed to create an ethics that would naturally flow outward. Their ethics was too inward oriented. That’s why most of their novels are so suffocating. I feel that “morality” is like a dirty word in Japanese literature. The term appears only when one is rebelling against the established “morality.” You see, I have a feeling that in Japanese literature “artist” is defined only as a rebel that goes against the established “morality.” I’m thinking of a writer like Dazai Osamu. I sense some hypocrisy in his attitude toward the world as well as in the definition of artist as a rebel.

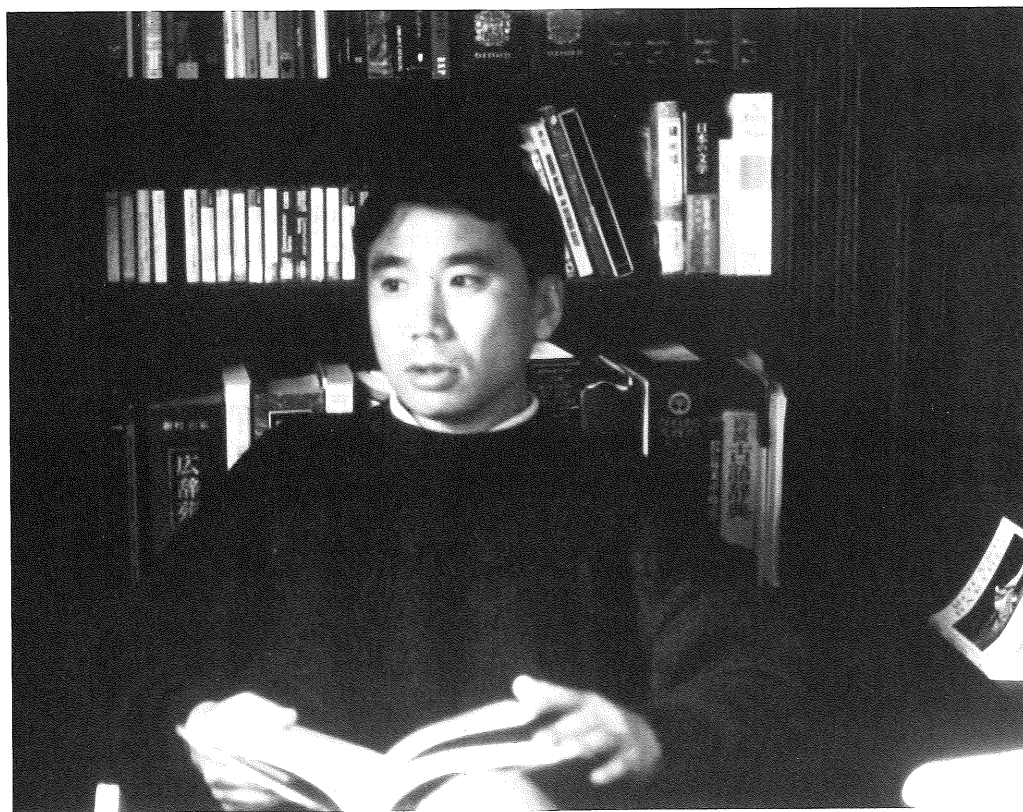
HH: You use many images from American culture in your works. What is American culture for you?

HM: I grew up in the sixties as an only child. The image of America I got from watching TV was of a fairyland, a completely other world. By reading American novels, I could escape into a different world, out of my loneliness of being the only child. It was like visiting Mars. But it took a long time to transplant this “new world” into the Japanese language. On the other hand, now, when I translate Raymond Carver’s works, I feel no cultural difference from the way he describes things and feelings. Actually, I started feeling sorry for America when I read his books. Of course there were pitiful characters in the works by older generations of American writers. But I never felt sorry for them. It’s different with more recent writers’ works. I can really share their sense of tragedy as a contemporary. You see, I just came back from Europe — Greece and Italy to be exact. Compared to Europe, where there is only its past, America and Japan do seem to share something similar: an obsession for the creation of new culture in such a short period of time.

HH: Are you thinking of writing a new novel in the near future?

HM: Yes. I can feel it coming. I feel really happy about it because when I don’t have any plans for a novel, I fear that I may never write one again. But when I know that I will be writing a novel soon, it feels great. It’s like

having a new girlfriend. I feel I can rework on the potential that I didn't quite fulfill last time. Of course, in real life, you can't redo too many things, but in fiction writing you can redo things more easily. The "I" in real life separates from the "I" who writes a novel — the one who goes to the other side. That sense of separation is irreplaceable. There is a novel by Jack London about a murderer who gets imprisoned somewhere in San Francisco. He rebels against a sadistic warden and gets all sorts of horrible treatment as a result. But the more torture he receives, the more active his imagination becomes. He can transport himself to a different country in a different age. For example, he goes to Korea of the eighteenth century or to ancient Egypt. In the end, his imagined self becomes much more vivid than the one in the prison. It's very much like this when I am writing a novel. The one who is writing and is immersed in the world of the novel becomes more real than the one in real life.



3. Haruki Murakami in Hosea Hirata's office, Princeton University, 1991

HH: Can you talk about unexplainable things that often appear in your work?

HM: What attracts me to the work of Raymond Carver is that his is a literature of details. He does not try to present a comprehensive picture of the world. He just writes details. Quite often in my mind things with meaning and things without meaning get connected. For example, whenever I listen to Stan Getz playing "A Girl from Ipanema," the image of a corridor in my high school comes to mind. I have no idea why. Once I wrote a story about why these two things may be connected. And when I think about the corridor, an image of green salad comes to mind. Again, I have no idea why. But somehow I feel the secret of my being is hidden in these unexplainable associations. The task of a novel is to dig up these secrets, but not by analysis, mind you. You just have to dig them up and present them. Writing a novel depends upon how well you can dig up your own hidden signs, so to speak. Critics always try to fix the meanings of these unexplainable connections. I often feel that their interpretations are off the mark. So I want to explain things myself, but I can't. It can be pretty frustrating. Of course they have to make a living by analyzing things, so even if I say that these things are real secrets so that no meanings can be attached, they have to come up with some interpretations. I think after all what critics write ends up being their own fictional creation. Although I may object to their interpretations, if I could think that their readings are their way of fictional writing, I can see that their readings could be meaningful on their own. I as the author produce a text. A text is partial to no one. I don't have the exclusive right to it. Although I may feel that the critics are mistaken, I suppose I don't have the right to say so. Critics have a different access to the text. No one can determine whether my reading of the text or that of the critics is better. I can understand this; nevertheless I get frustrated just the same. Perhaps if we could somehow gather all the different readings into one, then we may be able to get the right reading.

So we could come to an understanding?

What on earth did that woman mean, calling me up like that? And who on earth was she? The whole thing is a mystery.

What the hell, I tell myself. What do I care about understanding some strange woman's feelings, anyway? What difference could that possibly make? What matters now is finding a job. Then I can settle into a new life cycle.

Yet, even as I return to the sofa to resume the Len Deighton novel I got from the library, the mere glimpse of the telephone out of the corner of my eye sets my mind going. Just what was it that would take ten minutes to come to an understanding about? I mean, really, ten minutes to come to an understanding of something?

Come to think of it, the woman specified precisely ten minutes right from the start. As if nine minutes would have been too short, eleven minutes may be too long. Just like for spaghetti al dente.⁶

HARUKI RUNS

Haruki ran the Boston marathon in the time of three hours and thirty-one minutes.

No one answers, and it keeps on ringing. The ringing stirs up the loose dust floating in the dark. Neither my wife nor I ventures one word. Me drinking my beer, her sobbing away. Twenty-four rings before I lose count and just let the thing ring. You can't keep counting forever.⁷

NOTES

The interview was conducted in Japanese and translated by the author.

1. Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (New York: Kodansha International, 1989); epigraph on p. 143.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. Murakami, *Hear the Wind Sing*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978), p. 77.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. Murakami, "TV People," trans. Alfred Birnbaum, in *Monkey Brain Sushi* (New York: Kodansha International, 1991), p. 26.
6. Murakami, "The Windup Bird and Tuesday's Women," trans. Alfred Birnbaum, *New Yorker*, November 26, 1990, pp. 44-45.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 60.