

## ★ Honeybees and Distant Thunder

**Riku Onda**

**Philip Gabriel, Translator**

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Musicians converge on a single stage for a contest that will separate technical skill from true genius in *Honeybees and Distant Thunder*, a novel that cements Riku Onda as a virtuosic talent.

How does music make you feel? For one pianist in the Yoshigae competition—in its sixth year, but already world-renowned—it's like “Lovers gazing at each other. Shadows drawing closer. A beautiful night. flickering candlelight. A little embarrassing, a little bittersweet, a little tearful, a feeling of floating in the air.” These images and others race through the heads of those listening to Brahms and Rachmaninoff being given new life: they imagine themselves in rain-soaked fields. Cherished memories float through their minds. They are transported.

Onda's novel is both about people's reactions to music and about the skill that it takes to wrest divine truths from notes applied to paper. Synaesthetic and devout, it locates such meaning in the evolving work of four central talents: Akashi, who at twenty-eight is aging out of being able to consider music as a career path; Jin, untested on the contest circuit, whose gifts rise from somewhere primal and crystalline; and Aya and Masaru, who met music together as children, lost each other, and are delighted to reconnect on Yoshigae's stage. Only one musician can win, though all four start to desire something beyond first place: truth, told in the language of music.

Onda's coverage of the competition itself seeks transcendence in the translation of notes into emotions. And beyond each round, the story finds hope in how the pianists connect, pushing each other toward greatness as they beachcomb and flower-arrange and meet over meals. A paean to the power of music, *Honeybees and Distant Thunder* is an inspired novel about how art transforms people, and how it is transformed by their interpretations of it.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2023)

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