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FICTION

CRANES AT DUSK. By Hisako Matsubara. Translated by Leila Vennewitz. (Dial, \$15.95.) Saya is 10 when she hears the Japanese Emperor's voice, sounding oddly singsong over scratchy loudspeakers and radios, announce surrender and the end of World War II. What commences then is her agonizing search for a sense of balance in the new world she wakes up to, a half-lit, lonely place where yesterday's verities are wrong and the new truth is spoken in English by white men, and even women, wearing Christian crosses. "Cranes at Dusk" by Hisako Matsubara, a Japanese author who writes in German, has been smoothly translated by Leila Vennewitz. Like the author's first novel, "Samurai," this one seems to spring from another century insofar as it takes on issues that can only be considered large — it is about culture in violent change, women's roles, prejudice, parents and children, language and power, politics and God (or gods), death and transcendence. Yet it is not a treatise but a well-made novel arranged in short, storylike chapters and told quietly, in spare, playful language. We go to school with Saya — like the author, she is the daughter of a Shinto priest from Kyoto — and share her puzzlement and glee when the Emperor's photo, saluted the day before, is lowered to the floor and turned to the wall. In another scene she wants to call her older brother a fathead, a title he richly deserves; we feel the pressure on her to swallow the name lest she be punished for breaking the cardinal rule against girls' "cheekiness" with boys. We also share her desire to unravel old spiritual mysteries. Why does her baby brother, who loved the fairy tale about cranes at dusk carrying a boy away beyond the sun, have to die so young? Even her brilliant father, whose computations permitted him to predict the war's end, cannot answer this question. Moving, broad in concept, spare and bright in detail, "Cranes at Dusk" earns again its author's reputation as one of Japan's major new voices.

— Robert O'Meally