WHO LEAVES BEHIND A LAST WORD IN THE END, and to what end? This is the central question of this next section on *isho* (遺書), or "writings left behind." This catch-all term encompasses a wide variety of texts that include but are not limited to suicide notes. It can refer to an official, legal will prepared by someone anticipating natural death or suicide; anything from a formal, numbered note with practical instructions and requests to emotional, personal goodbye messages, or anything in between. If there is great variety in their content, what unites *isho* is their perceived status—legal or otherwise—as the writer's "last word." Or as one writer put it, "It is the lastness of last words that counts."[1]

In the case studies that follow, I focus on self-designated suicide notes (*isho* or *nōto*) left behind by both professional writers and amateurs. If part 1 on *jisatsu meisho* centered on a writer's (or reader's) physical proximity to sites where acts of self-death and self-writing collide, here it is the writer's temporal proximity to death that defines these texts. I ask, What, how, and why do some write in the face of suicide, and what are readers to do with these remains in its wake?

The impulse to leave behind last words (*yuigon*, 遺言) is what distinguishes humans from beasts according to manga artist and writer Okamoto Ippei:

> Neither cows nor fish leave behind last words when they die. Nor do birds or pine trees. Only humans.
>
> Ushi ya sakana wa shinu toki yuigon shinai. Tori ya matsu no ki mo shinu toki yuigon shinai. Yuigon suru no wa ningen dake de aru.[2]

The writings that human subjects leave behind are further divided hierarchically into ones "by the extraordinary and by the ordinary" (*hibonjin to bonjin no isho*), as per

his 1927 short essay title. If there are those who possess "a life and philosophy worthy of writing down to proudly leave behind to guide one's children and grandchildren," others do not. "At the time of death, we ordinary folks will either be totally at a loss or stubbornly put on airs—in either case, utterly unable to speak what is true."

If "we ordinary folks" are exempted from any high expectations, men of letters are not. In 1919, Mark Twain lamented the state of affairs even for this exceptional population, sardonically noting, "I do wish our great men would quit saying these flat things just at the moment they die."[3] Such comments reveal the often elitist and sexist assumptions about last words that revolve around the question of who has the right (or obligation) to leave them behind for posterity and the consensus around what constitutes a desirable last word. Who has the talent to do so is another question.

Given their occupation, we often expect writers *to* write and to write "well," even, or especially, in the face of an anticipated, self-willed death.[4] Unlike death from natural causes, suicide is a deliberate act that can be timed in such a way as to enable the careful composition of one's last words. It is the intentionality behind this act of self-writing in the face of self-death that lends these last writings a sense of especial importance. But this factor can cut both ways, for it can also engender cynicism that these self-styled last words are far too stylized to capture anything true about the moment or the individual writing them.

Writing in 1948, literary critic Nakamura Mitsuo articulated his skepticism on this point. Asking, "What do suicide notes say about that person's life?," he answers, "Usually, nothing at all" (*Jisatsusha no isho wa kono hito no seizen ni tsuite nani o kataru de arō ka? Nani mo kataranu no ga futsū de arō*). To explain his cynicism, he points to yet another hierarchical distinction, this time between professional writers and amateurs: "After all, the psychology of a person who is staring death in the face is not something that can be expressed in regular words. Even wordsmiths know how very difficult it is to express precisely in written language the feelings and thoughts of an average person's everyday life."[5] According to Nakamura, if wordsmiths possess an advantage over nonprofessionals, even what they produce inevitably falls short in the end.

In contrast, author Nosaka Akiyuki self-mockingly notes the literati's tendency to write last notes ad infinitum to explain why amateurs paradoxically write "better" ones, including suicide notes.

> I'm no literary critic of last notes, but after reading quite a few, I realized that they just do not suit novelists in the end. … Men of letters, after all, are writing them all year long.
>
> Boku wa, isho hyōronka jya nai no da keredo, kono tabi hajimete, shoka no sore o yomi, kekkyoku, shōsetsuka ni isho wa niawanai yō na ki ga suru. … Bungakusha wa, nenjū, isho o kaite iru.[6]

If these assessments suggest little consensus over who writes "best" in the face of death, they illustrate how last words were never exempt from becoming the

objects of literary criticism, excoriated as often as they were praised. They also reveal a shared premise about these writings and the criteria for judging them. The logic of many of these pronouncements about last pronouncements hinges on the belief that a final word should—and could—capture the final thoughts and feelings of a person at this critical moment, or as Okamoto puts it, "the truth" (*hontō no koto*).

The notion that the last words of someone who knowingly stands on the ledge, poised between life and death, represent a privileged articulation of this truth is one shared in literary and legal worlds. In the literary context, this view was perhaps most famously expressed by Nobel Prize–winning writer Kawabata Yasunari in his 1968 acceptance speech. There he cited the famous suicide note of fellow author Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (the subject of chapter 5) to endorse this privileged dying vision, or "eyes in their last extremity" (*matsugo no me*).[7] Poems, and poetics more generally, are thought to offer the perfect medium for capturing this last moment of clarity, or what Emily Dickinson has called in one of her poems "A Dying Eye."[8] As one scholar of deathbed poems explains, "The promise of an all-seeing 'dying eye' conveys precisely the kind of privileged vantage point that poets themselves strive to attain in their writing. … Belief in the revelation of life's mysteries on the deathbed, and faith in the unlimited insight of the dying hour, mark poetry's own claim to otherworldly or expanded vision, elevating the deathbed itself to the status of living poem."[9]

In Anglo-American law, the "dying declaration" has traditionally enjoyed special evidentiary status in court based on the theory that a dying person is not presumed to lie (*Nemo moriturus praesumitur mentiri*) given their imminent judgment at the hands of their all-knowing maker.[10] In the Japanese case, this notion is evident in the aphorism *Shinin ni kuchi nashi*, sometimes used to mean that "the dead tell no lies." And yet in Japanese law, *isho* themselves carry no legal weight and nor do any final spoken words captured in audio or audiovisual recordings; only those recorded in officially prepared written wills (*yuigonsho*) are invested with such status.

Legal authorities primarily use suicide notes to capture a more prosaic truth—whether a death is homicide or suicide—and to ascertain motive. Since the mid-1880s, data collected by the Japanese government began marking the presence or absence of a suicide note, and recent annual reports issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) include notes as "data to determine cause/motive of suicide" (*jisatsusha no jisatsu no gen'in/dōki-betsu no handan shiryō*).[11] The tendency of the Japanese police and the media to mechanistically isolate motive from these notes has been rightly criticized by medical scholars.[12] And yet medical professionals, too, have been known to probe notes to diagnose the patient posthumously, and often anachronistically. For example, a Japanese researcher used the 2002 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to label Fujimura Misao as having experienced a depressive episode based on

his writings a century earlier.[13] The media's own tendency to reductively deduce motives, especially surrounding hot-button contemporary issues like bullying (*ijime*) in the case of youth suicide, has been widely criticized by policy advocates, as has their tendency to reproduce suicide notes at all.[14]

In short, sociological, medical, and media discourse often converge to diagnose the pathologies of an individual or a society based on the words left behind. A 2001 article in *Chūō kōron* asks "a 29-character note: Why did this female university graduate student commit suicide?," while a 2005 *Shūkan Asahi* headline—"The note-less suicide that whispers its motive"—suggests that even when a note is nonexistent, motive is deducible from this fact.[15]

ISHO AS SELF-REPRESENTATION: THE ROYAL ROAD TO WHAT?

At most, only a third of all suicides in Japan leave behind notes. This statistic has been found to remain fairly constant, even during periods when suicide rates double, and it is comparable to such occurrences in many other nations.[16] In general, Japanese youths tend to leave notes more often than the elderly, women more often than men, and attempts more often than completed suicides. This has typically been interpreted as evidence that the former demographic "have stronger attachments to this world" (*gensei ni miren ga tsuyoi hito*) or alternatively that those who write a note exhibit greater volition and control over their choice to die.[17] Mental health professionals and policymakers now warn against assuming that the mere fact of writing signals control, calling for a more nuanced reading of the content, style, and context of such notes.

Dr. Edwin Shneidman, the founding father of the discipline of suicidology, began his research in 1949 when he inadvertently discovered a treasure trove of suicide notes in a veteran hospital, "a scientist's dream." They provided him with critical data for diagnosing "the suicidal mind" (to borrow the title of his 1996 monograph) or what he says was the closest thing to an available "patient history."[18] In 2004, a few years before his death, Shneidman reflected on his life's work and the use-value of such notes for mental health professionals: "At the very beginning, we believed (with excessive optimism) that, like Freud's notion about dreams being the royal road to the unconscious, suicide notes might prove to be the royal road to the understanding of suicidal phenomena. Reluctantly, after a decade or so of earnest efforts, I came to recognize that many notes are, in fact, bereft of the profound insights that we had hoped would be there."[19]

A similar sense of deflated optimism about the explanatory power of suicide notes can be found in the writings of Dr. Ōhara Kenshirō, a leading psychiatrist on suicide in Japan and the author of two monographs on suicide notes. In 1978, he reflected on the misconceptions he held about notes when he first began doing research on the subject a couple of decades earlier. While he had initially thought

Fujimura Misao's poem offered a "representative example of an *isho*," he later discovered in the files of his patients who had attempted suicide and in police records many that failed to live up to this lofty example. Instead, the majority were error ridden, illogical, scrawled with and on whatever was at hand—lipstick on a paper scrap, a matchbook cover, a sumo broadsheet. Moreover, most were filled with mundane, practical requests and "even those by famous writers somehow fail to deliver."[20] If both these mental health professionals warn against endowing suicide notes with too much importance, they also point out the danger of presuming the import of *not* writing. When Ōhara "asked [his] patients who survived an attempted suicide, 'Why didn't you write a note?' the majority of them responded: "Oh, now that you mention it, I guess I must've forgot."[21]

Where do all these cautions leave us? If not writing a suicide note tells us nothing more than that the individual forgot, then what, if anything, can the act of writing tell us?

Shneidman's own conclusion suggests the importance of stepping back from a diagnostic, forensic mode, whether medical or sociological, and applying a literary lens to help decipher these writings: "Now, it seems, we have come to rest somewhere in the middle, believing that, as a group, suicide notes are neither always psychodynamically rich nor psychodynamically barren, rather on occasion—when the note can be placed within the context of the known details of a life (of which that note is a penultimate part)—*then* words and phrases can take on special meanings, bearing as they do a special freight within that context."[22]

What is clear here is a shift from an unchecked belief in the transparency of language that might lay bare the writer-subject to a more measured rhetorical analysis. Rather than taking a single suicide note as an unfettered glimpse into the suicidal mind, Shneidman here suggests the need for close readings that are also deeply contextualized. While he rightly points out the need to consider them as part of the writer's biography, I would also stress the need to recognize that they are texts that, like any others, are also part of a larger corpus. As one Japanese psychiatrist writing in the late 1970s noted, "While it is possible to categorize suicide notes based on psychodynamics, since they have their own generic form of expression," they also require their own taxonomy.[23] In other words, suicide notes too are generic texts with their own rules and organizing principles.

GENERIC DISTINCTIONS OF NOTES

There often exists a generic template for last words, for both composing and judging them. For centuries in Japan, composing a last poem (*jisei*, 辞世) was de rigueur. That it came in the form of a thirty-one-syllable tanka or a seventeen-syllable haiku suggests the imposition of a clear structure, if not also its content to a large degree.[24]

Suicide notes also constitute a genre unto themselves. Like any genre, there is much diversity; as seen above, they can include anything from Fujimura Misao's lofty death poem to a note scrawled into the dirt or onto a paper scrap.[25] But also like any genre, they can be quite generic in nature. One famous experiment conducted by US psychiatrists in 1957 found that authentic and faked suicide notes differed so little in terms of content (both the mundane, practical requests and highly emotional ones) that lay readers could not tell the difference.[26]

In the late 1940s, Yamana Shōtarō surveyed suicide notes across early twentieth-century Japan and found striking continuity as well as key differences. He concluded that their content and style evolved over time, often tracking with literary developments. While the Meiji period (1868–1912) had "notes for the sake of notes" that tended to New Romanticism's vanity, self-mockery, and hyperbole, Taishō period (1912–26) ones were bold, concise, and straightforward; early 1930s notes were something of a hybrid of the two, even terser philosophic attempts to capture the pains of life or of the *ero-guru-nansensu* variety. With the onset of war, by the late 1930s, writing was replaced with even briefer, oral farewells, or flippant remarks, if they were remarked at all.[27] Intriguingly, in the 1930s, Japanese police actually used a literary taxonomy to categorize suicide notes into fifteen different genres, from death poems (*jisei*), open versus private letters, and abbreviated notices to aphorisms and manga sketches.[28]

As noted above, we should be skeptical about overgeneralizing any one era's style of suicide, since omissions and exceptions abound. Yet the notion that last words are influenced by generic requirements and by literary styles is worth highlighting here for several reasons. First, it tempers our desire to read these deliberate communications as subconscious slips of the pen that might allow readers "to glimpse the very depths of the human heart," to borrow the words of one Japanese literary critic touting a 1987 collection of famed last writings.[29] The sense that a suicide note offers a privileged unvarnished glimpse of the dead is similarly evident in contemporary media guidelines issued by the World Health Organization that call for self-censorship of suicide notes alongside any photographs of the deceased; the first item on its simple "What Not to Do" checklist is "Don't publish photographs or suicide notes."[30] Second, it usefully disrupts a natural tendency to read these texts with a focus only on motive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this study, it recognizes the ways that preexisting discursive modes could influence even these final momentous texts.

In what follows, my materials are broadly divided by genre with a focus on suicide notes in part 2 before turning to consider more fictional multimedia representations in part 3. As we will see, the divide is also never quite so clear-cut. Especially in the case of literary and visual artists who scripted their suicides into a note and/or into their artworks, these materials are not so easily divided into factual versus fictional media. The two were often tightly imbricated, sometimes by the writer's own design and sometimes by the reader's. What these examples

demonstrate are the ways that both writers and readers often situated these last writings vis-à-vis these genres and their own generic expectations.

THREE CASE STUDIES: AKUTAGAWA, KISHIGAMI, AND TSUBURAYA

In part 2, I first offer three in-depth case studies of self-designated "suicide notes" (*isho* or *nōto*). I include professional, aspiring, and amateur writers, both ones who claimed to be writing for and to others—Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "A Note to a Certain Old Friend" (1927)—as well as those who were writing for themselves—the aspiring poet Kishigami Daisaku's "Note for Myself" (1960). My third example centers on Tsuburaya Kōkichi, an Olympic marathon runner and Self-Defense Forces soldier, who wrote two suicide notes in 1968, one to his superiors and another to his family.

In selecting these, I make no claims at representing the whole of any suicidal population. With just one-third of suicides leaving behind suicide notes, this would be an impossible task in any case. Moreover, many demographics are largely excluded here; most conspicuously missing are any women, as well as the elderly and teenagers, two groups with some of the highest suicide rates in contemporary Japan.[31] My first three examples are all young men; Akutagawa took his life at age thirty-five in 1927, Kishigami died at age twenty-one in 1960, and Tsuburaya at age twenty-seven in 1968 in his barracks.

While the first two were famed or aspiring men of letters living in Tokyo, Tsuburaya was a soldier and athlete from a small rural town. His notes offer an important counterbalance to those written by professional and aspiring writers with a possible eye to their posthumous publication. Yet even this example written by a complete amateur is known by virtue of the fact that it became the object of literary criticism written by leading literary figures of the day. This included two who themselves went on to commit suicide afterward: Mishima Yukio in 1970 and Kawabata Yasunari in 1972. These two authors offer their own intriguing comparison given the fact that Mishima left behind so very many texts anticipating his own suicide, while Kawabata died without leaving a trace.

These three case studies have been chosen to facilitate thinking through the acts of writing and reading in the face and wake of suicide, and as the latter case suggests, also the act of *not* writing too. For each, I resist the impulse to read only to answer the elusive question of motive. This is not out of the same sense often articulated by cynics, such as poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, who claimed that "suicide notes are overwhelmingly all nothing more than 'excuses.' Only the gods truly know the true reason for suicide. Not even the person who commits suicide can possibly know."[32] Rather, my hesitance stems from the sense that this question is not where the textual traces always lead. While subsequent readers may naturally turn to them in order to answer this, it is not necessarily the most pressing question for the

writer. Alternatively, it may be a false lead that obscures the multiple, and not always compatible, explanations offered in a variety of texts and contexts.

Too often, there is a tendency to cite and distill a suicide note down to only its most pithy of phrases, whether Fujimura's "incomprehensible" (*fukakai*) or, as we will see below, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "vague anxiety" (*bonyari shita fuan*). Eminently quotable lines from notes by eminent individuals inevitably get more attention than other less illustrious examples, especially when they seem to encapsulate the complex motives for suicide in a single catchphrase.

In an effort to displace this singular focus, my first chapter on Akutagawa employs a more comprehensive reading strategy. I analyze his 1927 "A Note to a Certain Old Friend" alongside the host of other works he left behind that have been overshadowed by the fame of this note and its infamous "vague sense of anxiety." I read this note alongside and against its many intertexts and his many other suicide notes, as well as their tangled publication and distribution histories. These include works that he read and referenced in the note—from seventeenth-century playwrights to nineteenth-century philosophers—and other autobiographical and fictional texts that he himself wrote, some dated as late as the eve of his suicide and some from a decade before.

In the case of the aspiring young poet and university student Kishigami Daisaku (chapter 6), I take the opposite tact. I focus on a close reading of just one of the seven notes he left behind and designated as a writing meant only for himself. Titled "Boku no tame no nōto" (A note for myself), it was written during the seven-hour period immediately prior to his suicide. The condensed timeframe for its composition and the delimited audience lead to a different set of questions: What does it mean to designate oneself as the audience for a work that marks one's imminent self-erasure? And what kind of writing is produced with this audience and timing in mind?

In chapter 7, the young marathon runner and Self-Defense Forces lieutenant Tsuburaya offers an especially rich, if complex, case study. As a local and national hero, he was navigating personal and private identities in his last two notes. His pro forma apologies for failing family and country lent themselves to interpreting his suicide as a stereotypically Japanese response to failure. And yet the form of these notes exceeded their content to such a degree that they, along with its author, went on to have a surprising afterlife, prompting writings by both suicidal authors who, like Mishima, wrote "last letters all year long" (to borrow Nosaka Akiyuki's phrasing) and by those who, like Kawabata, chose not to leave behind a suicide note at all.

What this example suggests is that writing about the death of another—and about another's death writings—could also sometimes be a means of writing about one's own. As we will see, the writer Nosaka would write his own piece of literary criticism on *isho* that he published in a collection pointedly titled *Boku no shi no junbi* (My preparations for death, 1988). In the wrap-up to this chapter,

I discuss his blunt appraisal of *isho* by professionals and amateurs alike, ranging from elite kamikaze soldiers to farmer conscripts and from Fujimura and Ōgai to Tsuburaya and Mishima. His essay conveniently offers us an overview of the genre that cites several examples already encountered in earlier chapters. It also offers us the opportunity to reflect more on the ethics of undertaking the act of literary criticism in the case of suicide notes.

EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE AMONG THE DEAD: ETŌ JUN AND YAMADA HANAKO

In the final chapter of part 2, I seek to update and expand the pool by offering two case studies that address two populations underrepresented in both Nosaka's genealogy and my own case studies of *isho* thus far: the elderly and women. I first consider the much publicized suicide and suicide note of one of Japan's most famous literary critics, Etō Jun, in 1999 at age sixty-six and then the case of the young cult manga artist Yamada Hanako at age twenty-four in 1992. If Nosaka's essay offers a useful outsider and overview perspective of the genre from a distance, these two contemporary examples can remind us of the painful proximity and mortal consequences of this body of writings.

At first glance, this pair may seem to offer another study in contrasts, with the older conservative cultural critic at distinct odds with the alternative indie subculture to which Yamada belonged. In the wake of their suicides, however, each was taken as symbolic of a pressing contemporary issue, with Etō's as symptomatic of the ills of Japan's "graying society" and Yamada's representative of bullying (*ijime*). Rather than focus on the ways these suicides have been fit into these respective larger cultural narratives, in chapter 8 I focus on the common rhetorical strategies each writer employs in responding to what has been called "the exorbitant call to write one's own death."[33]

These writings all entail a complicated mode of address that imagines oneself dead but still speaking. It is the uneasy temporality of this act of writing in the face of death—and imagining its reading in its aftermath—that I explore throughout the remaining chapters in this book. In each case, I argue for the importance of considering how this act of writing fulfills a need for the writer, not just for its subsequent readers in retrospect. In other words, I suggest how the writer may also be its most important reader. Recognizing this, in turn, allows us to consider the text as both product and process. It opens up the question of why a person writes (or not) in the face of death.