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A Note for Oneself

Kishigami Daisaku

Kishigami Daisaku (1939–60), a third-year university student and aspiring poet, left behind seven letters to friends and family alongside one manuscript that he designated as being written for himself. Titled "Boku no tame no nōto" (A note for myself), the fifty-four pages were written after he had completed his preparations for dying on the evening of December 4, 1960.[1] He wrote it over a seven-hour period, continuing to write even after taking the drugs that, as per his plan, would knock him unconscious and result in his death by hanging from the second-floor window of his lodging house. Unlike Akutagawa's note addressed to a certain, if unspecified, addressee, this one is designated solely for the writer. The question it raises is, Why write for oneself knowing that self will soon no longer exist? And what kind of writing is produced with this audience and timeframe in mind?

In the body of the text, Kishigami is adamant that "these notes are ones that I write and leave behind entirely for myself alone" (*mattaku boku dake no tame ni*) (239). At points, though, Kishigami seems to stray from this stated purpose. He directly addresses friends, teachers, and writers he admires with emphatic exclamations, like "K-san yo!," "Takase yo!," or "Yoshimoto [Taka'aki]-san!"[2] He asks that a volume of his poems be published posthumously and dedicated "TO YOSHIKO," the object of his unrequited love (249). He asks that his mother be spared the sight of his dead face fearing she will go mad. He asks friends to forgive him and to live on.

These notes may be written for the self, but they also contain explicit instructions to many others who will survive him. The two things are not necessarily incompatible, however. Kishigami is aware that others will read what he has written "for himself" in the aftermath of his suicide. He notes with some pride that

they are as long, if not longer, than anything he had previously written, including his school thesis on Terayama Shūji. He even self-consciously acknowledges later readers when he blames his fatigue from writing three hours straight for causing "the logic to be all over the place and the handwriting to be a mess *as you see* [*goran no yō ni*]" (249, emphasis mine).

When Kishigami goes on to explain why he nonetheless continues to write, he suggests that these notes are both a product and a process for an artist who writes in the face of death. He explains:

> But if this can serve as splendid proof of my unsightly life until now, I shall continew [*sic*] to write as long as time permits, even if it is riddled with contradictions. I am a writer. Until the end, I fill up the blank squares of the manuscript page.
>
> Kore mo mata boku no buzama na sei o migoto ni shōmei suru hitotsu de aru naraba, mujun sakusō no mama jikan no kagiri kakitsuzukeyō [*sic*]. Boku wa sakka da. Saigo made genkōyōshi no kūhaku o umete iru. (249)

If the notes testify to his dedication to his craft and his identification as an "author" (*sakka*), they are also meant to embody his "unsightly" life and death.

AN UNSIGHTLY CORPSE AND CORPUS

Far from the aesthetically appealing suicide desired by Akutagawa, Kishigami revels in the notion of an "unsightly" (*buzama*) corpse that could embody his sense of mental and physical degradation. In these notes, he repeatedly returns to this figure. He warns himself against any "sentimentalism that would beautify an early death," instead insisting on its ugliness. Imagining his hanged figure stretched outside the window and the bodily excretions that would accompany such a death, he asks, "Can anyone say this is beautiful?" (240).

His self-disgust is palpable in his imaginings of this spectacle. "My hung corpse wettened by the rain will hang from the window until the morning. Let it be eaten by dogs!" He self-mockingly compares himself to wartime kamikaze pilots; like those heroic youths "who went off to die for the emperor in their planes," he too "will fly from the window and hang myself for the sake of love and revolution" (246). He is not, however, to become an object of commemoration. At one point, he asks for a quick and quiet cremation in the hopes of sparing his mother the sight of his corpse and he also wonders with some tenderness, "Who will return home with my ashes and bones clutched to their chest?" (253). But most of the time, he demands that his body be treated as an object. His corpse could be used to advance medical science by one of his doctor friends as research material, or it could be "burned, buried, or thrown into the sea, a river or field. I couldn't care less if you let me rot with the noose around my neck." What he rejects is being decorated with flowers and, most of all, any funeral services ("Buddhist, Christian, or worst of all Shinto") that he dismisses

as "nothing more than masturbatory self-comfort [*ji'i*, 自慰] for those that are left behind" (243).

It is not coincidental that he both repeatedly rejects any burial that would put his body to rest and insistently returns to the image of his hanging body suspended indefinitely in the rain. The writing itself ensures that this hanging and haunting figure remains. At the very end of the piece, he closes with this specter: "Tomorrow morning, when dawn breaks, I will just be an unsightly corpse exposed to the rain" (254).

His chosen method is one that will confirm just how abject his suicide, life, and death are for it will ensure the display of this sorry spectacle. But imagining the gruesome discovery of his body is also at times recounted with a sense of levity and even delight: "Well then, who will be the first to discover it? The milkman? The newspaper delivery boy? Whoever it is will be surprised and ring the landlord's bell. Well now, what a mess. But the sparrows that come chirping noisily to my window every morning, what about them? In any case, this hanged figure is sure to set the area abuzz for a while at least" (242).

Kishigami delights in imagining this spectacle as if it were a scenario for a play. He titles his act "Dying on a rainy evening in Tokyo" (*Ame no asa, Tokyo ni shisu*) borrowing the idea from the 1954 American film *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1954, directed by Jack Cummings), which in Japanese was titled *Ame no asa Pari ni shisu*. At one point, he begs his imagined audience to lighten up and see the comedy amid the tragedy: "My tears are damp. But I die smiling. Won't a single one of you please just smile along with me? A tiny smile, a guffaw, a derisive snort, anything will do" (241, 253).

At moments like these, Kishigami presents himself as a character—sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, always cynical—in a storied play that borrows heavily from preexisting literary models. While he references some tubercular "poets who died tragically young" (*yōsetsu kajin*), the author that he refers to the most is Dazai Osamu.[3] Kishigami plans out his method meticulously so as to avoid "screwing it up like Dazai in 'Ubasute'" (253), a story that recounts one of Dazai's four failed suicide attempts. His death will be like "Naoji's suicide in *Setting Sun* that was discovered by the pig-like waitress-dancer on a morning in a mountain villa in Izu" (242). He imagines his cousin would laugh if he cited the famous line from *No Longer Human*—"Giving birth to me was a mistake!" (246). Earlier that year, for his holiday greeting in his 1960 New Year's card, Kishigami had even borrowed the first line from Dazai's maiden short story collection *Bannen* (The declining years, 1936): "I planned to die" (*Shinō to omotte ita*).[4]

Dazai, as both author and character, offers a touchstone that provides a model or just as often, an object lesson, against which Kishigami might sculpt and script his own suicide. Dazai's own imitators make an oblique appearance in this vein as well, including Dazai's protégé Tanaka Hidemitsu. As discussed in chapter 3, in a deliberate echo of Dazai's own suicide and his final unfinished manuscript "Guddo・bai" ("Goodbye"), about a year and half later, Tanaka left behind a

manuscript titled "Sayōnara" when dying before Dazai's grave. Tanaka's piece begins with a list of how to say "goodbye" in a variety of languages—"Goodbye" "Au revoir" "Auf Wiedersehen" "Zàijiàn"—only to declare his preference for the uniquely Japanese "Sayōnara" because it marks a definitive, final break.[5] In a clear echo of Tanaka, Kishigami writes: "Ahh! AUF WIEDERSEHEN! … I will no longer be able to say AUF WIEDERSEHEN! Sayōnara. Sayōnara to everything. There shall not be any 'day we meet again'" (254).

Like Akutagawa, Kishigami's highly choreographed death scene is often seen and depicted through and in texts. He, too, eagerly anticipates the act and its future reception. In his many imaginings of his death scene, whether filled with self-disgust or mockery, Kishigami offers a disembodied view of himself from a remove. But he also offers an excruciating account of the embodied experience of awaiting and preparing for death: "My preparations for death proceed along quietly. No one knows. Just me. Until the shock of discovering my hanged corpse tomorrow morning, no one will know. As for me, I can only know just these next two or three hours" (246). Although Kishigami opened his note by claiming in his first line that "preparations were already completed" (239), here he suggests they are ongoing. Writing is part of that preparation.

As a product, the notes offer an outward-directed corpus that can stand in for his corpse, de facto and post facto evidence of his "unsightly" existence.[6] As a process, however, the notes chronicle his experience of time marching slowly and inexorably toward death. If Akutagawa's note offered a means of imagining the aftermath of his suicide as if he too were a spectator, for Kishigami, the notes also embody the experience of waiting and writing for death.

MARKING TIME

Kishigami writes to kill time. He writes while waiting for an opportune moment that will not be interrupted by passersby or neighbors. As he explains about halfway through, "the reason I record these notes is entirely to kill time; it is not a performance. My preparations are already finished. A beautiful green rope and pure white Brovarin pills. Death by poison and hanging. No worries about failure. It will surely be a splendid suicide. But the hour is still early" (246–47). There is a difference to note here between his characterization of the act of killing himself and the act of writing. He does not claim that his suicide lacks performativity. In fact, he sets the scene as if it were a stage with props in place for the "splendid suicide" to come. But that is not the same as the writing, which he insists here is not part of the performance, but rather a means of marking time.

The manuscript feels like a ticking time bomb with its repeated mentions of time moving inexorably toward an end that is already written: "It is now eight o'clock. Only a few hours left. My history will come to an end at a certain hour on the morning of December 5, 1960" (239). The precise hour he will die is less than

certain, but in the interim, he waits and writes, "Wait at least until one or two in the morning. Now it is just before eleven p.m. Still two or three hours;" "I still have manuscript paper. I still have time. Having just filled my belly last night with enough sushi for a lifetime, I won't likely become hungry anytime soon" (247); "At last, it is now December 5, 1960. A bit after twelve. All in the house are asleep. What about the house across from my window? In one or two more hours. Goodbye to everything" (251); "Sitting *seiza*, I wait. AHH! I wait. All my life waiting. For something. And now, shaking from the cold, I wait for my own death by my own hand. That's it. I should smoke a 'Midori'" (252).

His bodily experience of waiting and writing is chronicled in a text that becomes increasingly disordered as it goes on, riddled with spelling errors and illegible handwriting. He bids himself to wait again and again, with his anxiety mounting as time passes—"The light next door remains on. Maybe they fell asleep with it on? Wait until two a.m. Just about forty minutes more. … Will that light next door not just go out quickly?" (253)—and finally berates his night owl neighbor and friend Takase: "Come on! Go to sleep! Come on now. Everything is over. Nothing is beginning anew. No resurrection. … Wait another thirty minutes. It will be two a.m." (254).

Given the looming deadline, Kishigami is vigilant about keeping his writing on track. He berates himself whenever he feels he has strayed off course: "Well, what then? Your life only has four or five hours to go! What the hell are you doing worrying about your funeral, or jealously badmouthing the one woman you believe in and love. … It's already past nine! There is no time. Get back on topic and preach away!" (243).

After this harangue, Kishigami turns to a big-picture explanation for his present predicament. He traces the relevant biographical details from childhood—his father's death after being repatriated in 1946 and extreme childhood poverty in the immediate postwar—to his college years when he "lived for the sake of love and revolution!," embracing the Anpo student protest movement and romantic love only to see both end in failure (244). Time is highly compressed here. Unlike the majority of the note where present time ticks by minute by minute at an excruciatingly slow pace, his past is recounted in mere minutes and a few sentences. Whereas a single hour between eleven p.m. and midnight takes up over three pages, here a single paragraph traces fourteen years of Kishigami's life. It conveniently and neatly encapsulates the multiple causes leading to his suicide that would be cited to explain it in retrospect.

At the time, "the police judged it a simple unrequited love suicide by a youth disenchanted with political movements, in line with the contents of the note [*bunmen dōri*]."[7] Kishigami himself repeatedly points to lost love as the primary cause. Early in the note, he insists twice in rapid succession that "this is nothing more than a failed love suicide [*shitsuren jisatsu*]" (240) and returns to this point in its last paragraph. Notwithstanding these declarations, for many, his catchy phrase

"love and revolution" (*koi to kenmei*) summed up his motive. As with Fujimura Misao, twinned causes—personal and political—could explain not only his own suicide but also those of his generation, offering a new record of disaffected youths.

In retrospect, Kishigami quickly became marked as a "man of his times" (*toki no hito*), where personal and national histories converged and coincided with near perfection.[8] But even Kishigami's own definitive concluding statements regarding his suicide does not coincide with any end, neither that of his life nor his text. In the final paragraph of his note, he writes, "If I am still conscious after taking 150 Brovarin pills, I shall perhaps write a poem, but will end here by capping it off with this one line: This is the unrequited love suicide of a single man. No-thing [*sic*] more" (254). He does not, in fact, "cut off" (*hitokugiri tsukeru*) his writing with this declaration. Instead, he continues for nine more sentences before dating and signing the note, writing an additional postscript, and finally composing a poem. Although he insists on the final word here that explains his reasons for dying in no uncertain terms, he continues to write.

Rather than read his note to discern motive alone, I suggest we pay attention to Kishigami's central preoccupation throughout the text: to mark time by (and with) writing. Even the single sweeping passage that covers such a large swath of his life (fourteen of his short twenty-one years) was written in less than an hour, the time of its composition carefully marked on both ends.

Time is the organizing principle of the entire work. He began by declaring his preparations complete and by anticipating that time will elapse according to expectations: "*Junbi wa sude ni kanryō shita. Mohaya jikan no keika ga, yotei no puroguramu o suikō suru darō*" (239). He ends his note similarly optimistically:

> Everything goes as plannned [*sic*], nothing more. And so then, sayonara. It's finally two a.m.
>
> Manji yotei douri [*sic*] ni suginai. Sore de wa, sayōnara. Yatto ni-ji da.
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In concluding here with this definitive date and time stamp, he marks time in both senses of the word. In the end, however, he is betrayed by time, noting in a postscript that the poison has not taken effect as quickly as he had thought: "2:30 a.m., poison. Although I thought I'd soon lose consciousness, no go –. I tried stepping outside but couldn't stand the cold, so I dragged myself back in and took more of the pills scattered about. It is now 2:37 a.m."

This delay does give him the leeway to fulfill his promise that he would write a poem if he were still conscious after taking the pills. He closes his postscript:

Face hidden by a raincoat.	*Kao wa rēnkōto de kakusu.*
Lights turned off in the pitch black,	*Denki o keshite makkura yami no naka de*
writing. What bullshit!	*kaite iru. Detarame da!*

With this final poem, Kishigami strives to achieve his goal of writing until death, to know and experience that exceptional and everyday time and to capture it in writing. But there are limits inherent to such a project.[9] These limits are signaled best perhaps by the poem's use of the continuative grammatical form for the verb writ-*ing* (*-te iru*). Kishigami's note must content itself with marking and writing time.

Acts of writing and dying may coincide, but never the state of death itself. This point is nicely captured in one of Proust's favorite phrases—"Plus tard, j'ai compris," or "Later, I understood." As Paul de Man explains, this phrase describes the limits of self-knowledge in the case of our own deaths: "As a writer, Proust is the one that knows that the hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth's inability to coincide with itself."[10]

In his last poem, Kishigami returns to the figure of the corpse, albeit one quite different from his earlier envisioning. Rather than an overt display of his unsightly hanging figure, here instead is only a cloaked face, a bodyless form. Devoid of pronouns, the subject is erased. And yet amid the darkness emerges the shadowy figure of a writer, or more accurately, a hidden body at work writing away. The act of writing continues even if it is damnable. The poem, the text, and the life conclude with this curse of writing into darkness.