7

A Note to the Nation

Tsuburaya Kōkichi

The tragic story of young Olympic marathoner Tsuburaya Kōkichi (1940–68) is rehearsed with reliable regularity every four years: Tsuburaya, a twenty-seven-year old lieutenant in the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF), was overtaken by British runner Basil Heatley before a crowd of seventy-five thousand spectators at Yoyogi Stadium during the final lap of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics marathon, relegating him to third place (fig. 22).[1] Ichikawa Kon's documentary *Tokyo Olympiad* (1965) captures this moment in its climactic twenty-minute-long sequence of the marathon. The ease with which Heatley overtakes the oblivious Tsuburaya is grueling to watch in retrospect, but the contemporary sports commentators also note with praise that the race marks Tsuburaya's personal best time and the pride of a nation whose "flag will be hoisted in the Olympic stadium for the first time in 28 years."

Although Tsuburaya vowed to "hoist the Hinomaru" four years later in the Mexico games, he was plagued by injuries, and on January 9, 1968, he died by slitting his carotid artery. He died in his SDF dormitory bed clutching his bronze medal. By his bedside, Tsuburaya left behind two suicide notes, one to his family, and another to his teachers and SDF superiors that read:

> To the headmaster, sorry.
>
> Department and Section Chiefs, I was unable to accomplish anything.
>
> Instructor Miyashita, sincere apologies for having caused you trouble.
>
> Planning Section Chief, sorry for not keeping my promise.
>
> I offer prayers for success at the Mexico Olympics.
> January 1968.[2]

FIGURE 22. Tsuburaya's final lap in Yoyogi Stadium, 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Courtesy Smith Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

Everything about the incident and this note lent itself to an interpretation of his suicide as stereotypically Japanese, a textbook case of an altruistic suicide or "social role narcissism" as per sociologist George De Vos's Durkheimian interpretation of the Japanese case.[3] It appeared to be propelled by a sense of shame in the face of failure to live up to group expectations.

This failure was particularly acute for someone like Tsuburaya, who was charged with representing both the local and the national as a small-town boy from rural Sukagawa in Fukushima prefecture and as a member of the SDF. As reported in the local press, his family returned home to a crowd of five thousand gathered at Sukagawa station, "his ashes clutched to his father's chest, along with the funeral portrait of him in his SDF uniform and his bronze medal from the Tokyo Olympics carried by his tearful brother." His brother told those who gathered, "Kōkichi has returned home now. We are truly sorry that he could not meet your expectations." These expectations were immense, as suggested by his nicknames—"the star of the SDF" (*jieitai no hoshi*) and "the Japanese Zátopek" (after the Czechoslovakian triple gold-medal winning runner from the 1952 Olympics). Tsuburaya's natural "strong sense of responsibility" was said to be intensified all the more given the occasion: the first Olympics held in Asia and one that marked Japan's postwar debut on the international stage.[4]

While some competing explanations for his suicide cited personal problems, even these were thought to offer yet more evidence for the failure of individualism in the face of sports nationalism. His recent broken engagement stemmed from the forced delay of his marriage by his father and coaches until after the Mexico Olympics. Unlike Fujimura Misao, whose pure philosophical suicide was rendered suspect by tabloid reports that a love suicide was the root cause, in Tsuburaya's case, lost love only compounded the tragedy. He had sacrificed love for the sake of running for his country only to find himself incapacitated by physical injuries. If the SDF hadn't "killed him" as some claimed, then his severe upbringing under his strict father that made him incapable of disobedience had.[5] His suicide note filled with apologies to his superiors certainly encouraged this interpretation.

But reconciling this with another note that Tsuburaya left for his family was not so simple. This one foregrounded the private young man whose most cherished desire was instead to live with, and for, his family:

> Father and Mother, the yam rice on the 3rd of January was delicious. The dried persimmon and the rice cakes too were delicious.
>
> Elder brother Toshio and elder sister, the sushi was delicious.
>
> Elder brother Katsumi and elder sister, the wine and apples were delicious.
>
> Elder brother Iwao and elder sister, the shiso rice and spicy pickles were delicious.
>
> Elder brother Kikuzō and elder sister, the grape juice and Yōmei wine sake was delicious. Thank you also for always taking care of the laundry.

Elder brother Kōzō and elder sister, thank you for all the rides to-and-fro in your car. The cuttlefish was delicious.

Elder brother Masao and elder sister, I am terribly sorry to have worried you.

Yukio-kun, Hideo-kun, Mikio-kun, Toshiko-chan, Hideko-chan, Ryōsuke-kun, Takahisa-kun, Miyoko-chan, Yukie-chan, Mitsue-chan, Akira-kun, Yoshiyuki-kun, Keiko-chan, Kōei-kun, Yū-chan, Kī-chan, Masatsugu-kun, please grow up to be fine, upstanding people.

Father and Mother, Kōkichi is far too tired to keep on running. Please forgive me somehow.

Sorry for all the endless pain and trouble you went to on my behalf. Kōkichi just wanted to live by mother's and father's side.

Spurred by this plaintive cry, in July 1969, the family built a small house on their property that they filled with his things. Among the two thousand items were his SDF and Olympics uniforms, trophies including the bronze medal, and his two suicide notes. His mother explained that their motivation was "to live in this retirement home alongside the things he left behind in keeping with my child's dying wish." Before long, friends and fans came to pay their respects, and the private home, originally named "Saishōan" after Kōkichi's posthumous Buddhist name, gradually became known as the Tsuburaya Kōkichi Commemorative Hall. For over three decades, the family—his parents and his closest elder brother, Kikuzō, and wife—staffed the museum, sharing memories and stories about Kōkichi with visitors. In 1999, the city approached the family with a proposal to establish an official memorial hall in his name. His brother resisted for several years, explaining to reporters his desire "to keep Kōkichi, who was so very tired from it all, removed from all the fuss and let him rest. … Kōkichi just wanted to be by his parents' side. Why must we move him?"[6]

His family members here suggest the comfort they took in living among Kōkichi's remains and the comfort they imagined he derived from this as well. These did not include his literal physical remains that were interred at the local Buddhist temple. Instead, it was the objects he left behind (*ihin*, 遺品) that offered a substitute presence, a memento or *katami* (形見), a "glimpse at the form" of the lost one. When the family eventually relented and donated all of Kōkichi's things to the city for exhibition in their glossier big-scale memorial that was established at the Sukagawa Arena in June 2006, their sense of loss was compounded. It was as if they had lost Kōkichi twice over. As his brother Kikuzō poignantly put it, "Displaying the things he left behind was fated to be and we were fortunate to have many people come to see them. But, if we hadn't displayed them, then we would've been able to keep them forever as our household treasure [*uchi no tama to shite zutto oite oku koto ga dekita*]. … Displaying them was half good, and half bad, I'd say." As his comment suggests, although this transfer marked a definitive

shift, it was also part of a gradual process that transformed private grief and a private home for a family's beloved dead into a public institution.[7]

No object became part of the public domain and discourse more than the suicide note Kōkichi sent to his family. It was quoted in full in the contemporary press and continues to pop up on blogs today. It has been adapted into artworks, from avant-garde plays and a hit song by a female folk band in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a boys' (*shonen*) manga in the late 1980s and as recent as a 2015 musical comedy at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre.[8] The sheer variety and longevity of these adaptations suggest just how manipulable this note has proven to be, readily extractable from its original context and retrofitted to suit a variety of generic demands.

Each offers a libretto of sorts for his suicide notes. In the Pink Pickles' hit folk song from January 1972, "Hitori no michi" (Solitary road), the protagonist wonders about the purpose of endlessly running:

> One day I ran. After that, I thought quietly to myself. For whose sake do I run? Wearing away at my youth. On rainy days, on windy days, running headlong in a solitary world. For what purpose do I persist? Bearing the pains in my legs. With just one grand dream: the five-colored Olympic rings. Not a medal for the sake of Japan. As nourishment to power the running.
>
> Father, forgive me. Mother, forgive me. Though I received this life from you, I took it with my own hand. I wanted you to see me just one more time, dressed in my finest atop the winner's podium. But my body will not move. Truly, I can run no longer. I can run no more.[9]

In pointing to the familial and national pressures to compete in the Olympics, the lyrics were aligned with interpretations of Tsuburuya's suicide as a last-ditch expression of individualism and anti-authoritarianism. They also fit into the generic conventions of folk songs. Likewise, the 1980s manga adaptation taps into the tropes of *shonen* manga with panels depicting his father haranguing him mercilessly.[10] This one invokes another common explanation for his suicide; his devastating loss in the final lap at the Tokyo Olympics could be traced back to an anecdote when his father scolded him for looking back during a high school race to see if his opponent was close.

What helped propel all these competing interpretations of his suicide was the fact that his notes were largely devoid of them. The fact that Tsuburaya had chosen to leave behind two notes—one to his superiors and another to his family—further encouraged splintered readings. As did their brevity and opacity.

Tsuburaya's deceptively simple suicide and his deceptively simple suicide notes drew the attention of many of his contemporaries whose analyses often depended on a selective citation of one note at the expense of the other. This included the unlikely pair of writers Mishima Yukio and Kawabata Yasunari, who would each die by suicide themselves a few years later, Mishima in November 1970 and Kawabata in April 1972. The two writers make for a study in contrasts; Mishima's suicide at age forty-five

was as loud as Kawabata's at age seventy-two was mute. Mishima left behind a vast number of textual traces in a variety of media before choosing a rather spectacular method and a public spectacle, while Kawabata's noteless and largely traceless suicide by gassing in his study fueled denials that it was in fact a self-willed death.

Before considering what these writers' assessments of the amateur writer and pro-marathoner Tsurubaya might tell us about their own acts of writing (or not) in the face of suicide, I first turn back to Tsuburaya's two notes to offer a closer reading and to ask, What kind of remains do these notes offer for those left behind? For the writer himself? And for its other unanticipated and unintended readers? Finally, what kind of self is represented or absented in these notes?

"I"-LESS SUICIDE NOTES

Each of Tsuburuya's notes was deceptively simple in its own way. The one to his superiors seems so very perfunctory as to not even merit mention. The formulaic lineup of apologies to his SDF squadron leaders, coaches, and teachers for his own failures alongside his prayers for the Japanese team's success in the Mexico Olympics later that year merely confirm the reigning explanation of his suicide as altruistic groupism. His submersion of the self in the service of the larger group and its goals seems obvious. The lack of any signature only confirms this self-abnegation.

Even the longer note to his family, as many commentators have noted, is mundane in the extreme. It, too, is filled with his apologies and thanks to a list of individuals who are arranged hierarchically by title. It contains formulaic (and more formally worded) apologies to one of his elder brothers and wife as well as to his parents, begging their forgiveness and apologizing for "tirelessly causing them pain and worry." It is filled with the many local foods and drinks he enjoyed during his recent New Years' visit home (eleven total) that he declared "delicious" (seven times) and a list of all the members of his extensive family (thirty-one in total). If it denies much insight into Tsuburaya's own emotions and thoughts about his suicide, it supplies an overabundance of factual recounting.

Neither note includes an explicit demand, but the recipients responded to what they perceived to be Tsuburaya's implicit requests. As described above, his family decided to return "him" (in the form of his things) to rest in the ancestral home in response to the note's last lines where the exhausted Kōkichi expresses this belated desire. His teammates answered his final prayer for their success at the next Olympics; fellow marathoner Kimihara would win the silver at the Mexico Olympics in keeping with a promise he made in a consolation message sent to Tsuburaya's family: "Sleep peacefully Tsuburaya-kun. In accordance with your will, I pledge to raise the Hinomaru in Mexico."[11] As these divergent responses suggest, one note is situated in the realm of the personal and familial, while the other lies squarely in the national.

Despite their structural similarities and parallels, the longer letter to the family contains such a curious surplus of detail that it exceeds any perfunctory expression

of apology or thanks. Tsuburaya addresses each and every one of his relatives, thanking his parents and his six elder siblings and their spouses for their many kindnesses to him, and bidding his seventeen nieces and nephews to become "fine, upstanding people" (*rippa na ningen*). One brother and his wife are thanked for always taking care of the laundry and for the Yōmei wine sake, another for chauffeuring him around and for the cuttlefish. To be more precise, he does not thank his relatives for the food and drink. Instead, there is a haunting repetition of the antiquated phrase "… was delicious" (*oishū gozaimashita*). Although these lines are usually translated as "I enjoyed …," significantly here, Tsuburaya is not the subject of the sentence. Instead, there is a conspicuous absence of an "I" throughout the note.

In fact, neither note contains a single use of any first-person subject. I/me/my language is entirely absent from both notes despite my above translations, which required inserting them in the interests of legible and grammatical prose. For example, "[I] was unable to accomplish anything" (*nani mo nashiemasen deshita*) or "sorry for not keeping [my] promise" (*oyakusoku mamorezu aisumimasen*). Given that Japanese grammar does not require an explicit subject, Tsuburaya's elision of any "I" is perhaps less significant than his choice of a subject when he does include one. Here too, instead of any first-person language is a third-person perspective: "Kōkichi." At the end of his letter to his family, he writes:

> Father and Mother, Kōkichi is far too tired to be able to keep on running. Please somehow forgive [me]. Sorry for all the endless pain and trouble [you] have gone to on [my] behalf. Kōkichi just wanted to live by father's and mother's side.
>
> Chichi haha uesama Kōkichi wa, mō sukkari tsukarekitte shimatte hashiremasen. Nanitozo oyurushi kudasai. Ki ga yasumaranaku gokurō, goshinpai o okake itashi mōshi wake arimasen. Kōkichi wa chichi haha uesama no soba de kurashitō gozaimashita.

This is the most personalized moment of the letter where he describes his own physical and mental state. It is therefore especially striking that he uses the distanced third person here. As we will see in the cases of both the elderly literary critic Etō Jun and the young manga artist Yamada Hanako (the subjects of chapter 8), Tsuburaya is not alone in this choice.

There is evident tension between claiming and disavowing an embodied speaking subject here. On the one hand, his bodily sensations are at the fore. Both taste and physical exhaustion presume a bodily subject who is sensing these things. His apologies for causing trouble and his requests to be forgiven also presume a subject who is acting on others and being acted on by them. On the other hand, this "I" subject is nowhere explicitly present. Instead, the speaking self seems to disappear under the weight of the repetitive prose that foregrounds objects, especially the many delectable comestibles. Under the weight of so much repetition, even the long lists of other people's names threaten to become itemizable objects. At the end of the note, his name, too, joins this list. Kōkichi is objectified in both senses of the word. Apprehensible as an exhausted young body yearning to

return to his parents' side, he appears here as a bodily presence albeit one that is external to the writer's own body.

For any subsequent reader of the text, however, that writing body is inescapably present. Copies of both handwritten notes are displayed side by side in a case at the Memorial Museum.[12] Each line of each text concludes with a stark period punctuation mark (. or 。). Oddly, even the line with just the date that concludes the letter to his superiors ends this way:

> January 1968.
> 一九六八　一.

These punctuation marks give the sense of a series of potential finales; each signals the paused pen and hand of the one who wrote it. In this way, even the generic letter to his superiors comes alive from these markers of materiality, or what Markus Nornes has so nicely called "corporeal calligraphy" that "refers us back to the human being behind the brush."[13]

Most haunting is the presence of a speck of Tsuburaya's blood that appears on the letter to his family (fig. 23). It appears on the second line of the first page, poised neatly between two characters. It interrupts, but does not obscure, his praise for the deliciousness of the dried persimmon and the rice cakes. The page is also stained with tears that fell from his elder brother Kōzō's eyes as he read the letter. These bodily excretions of writer and reader alike are inscribed onto and into the text forever; writing and reading bodies become inseverable from the text. The result is a palimpsest that layers acts of writing, dying, and reading all together.

The metaphor of the palimpsest is a most useful one for considering the multilayered texts left behind by someone who chooses self-destruction. As I argued above about Akutagawa's many textual and intertextual traces, rather than see the most recent, proximate text as the authoritative one that displaces earlier ones, it is more productive to consider each one as part of a layered heterogeneous whole. And like a palimpsest, these notes retain the material and bodily traces of their composition evoking a manuscript culture that depends on using the same raw material again and again with new additions and revisions, while never entirely effacing the many versions that came before. I turn now to look at how Tsuburaya's contemporaries regarded this palimpsest, often privileging one layer of the text over another for their own ends.

The note to his family was especially ripe for interpretation with its idiosyncratic combination of being simultaneously terse and taciturn, on the one hand, and verbose, on the other. Its repetition of hackneyed phrases somewhat counterintuitively transformed the note into hauntingly powerful prose. In Kara Jūrō's 1969 play *Koshimaki Osen*, the protagonist, Tsuburaya Hōichi (an amalgam of Kōkichi with the mythical character of Mimi-nashi (earless) Hōichi) invokes the words from the note rather than the Buddhist Heart Sutra as protection against the samurai ghosts that possess him. The full text of the suicide note is even included as an exemplary

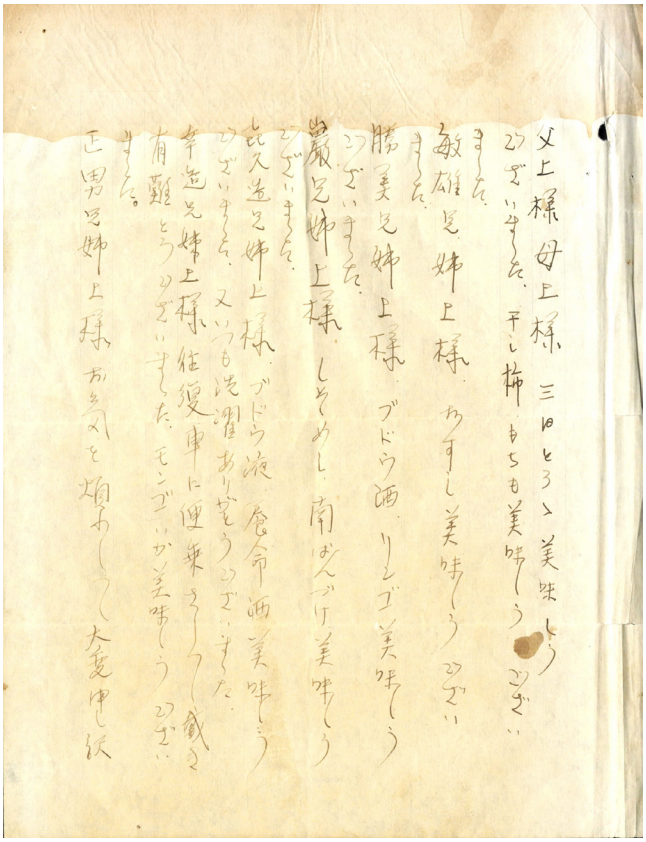

FIGURE 23. Kōkichi's blood- and tear-stained note to his family. Courtesy Sukagawa City Tsuburaya Kōkichi Memorial Hall.

writing sample in a primer aimed at aspiring writers that was published in 1987.[14] As this suggests, its form exceeded its content. Equally important was its context, as the final words of a young man who had chosen a violent self-death. Reading this letter became an exercise in literary criticism that, like any interpretive act, reveals as much about the object under study as the one studying it.

TSUBURAYA, FARMER-POET

In trying to figure out what the suicide note to his family was, commentators often first tackled the question of what it was not. For poet-critic Matsunaga Goichi, "The suicide note was not an explanation of his 'death.' Instead, it was a final sweet look back on 'life.'" For essayist Sawaki Kōtarō, the note was "oddly lacking in self-assertion, … and what remains is only a message to his blood relatives." Implicitly

or explicitly, a contrast was drawn between Tsuburaya's choices and "usual" suicide notes. Kawabata Yasunari offered the most extended and explicit comparison: "All too often, whether consciously or unconsciously, suicide notes tend to smack of attachments, resentments, exaggeration, affectation, self-affirmation or abnegation, self-justification or incrimination. But, in this one, there is not the slightest hint of any of these. It is wholly honest and pure." Even more than the raw glimpse into his pain afforded by its final lines, the detailed listings of his kin and the many local delicacies he enjoyed with them contained, as Kawabata put it, a "pathos unmatched in ten million words."[15]

For Matsunaga, the choice to rehearse his family lineage and to list only native foods was a means by which Tsuburaya was re-rooting himself in the local and rejecting the national. The extensive listings of his family in birth order "affirm family hierarchies for this seventh youngest son." The existence of two notes—one private and one public—suggested Tsuburaya's divided self, fractured between his local rural roots and his national pursuits as an Olympian and SDF soldier. The note to his family offered him a final return to his hometown, a moment when he untangles the two halves of himself and "despairing of his false image enters into his real image" and thereby "is finally able to see himself freed from state power." Redemption lies in this reversion to local kinship structures and away from state power; his "humanity was restored just in the act of writing that note."[16]

While Matsunaga warns against oversimplifying things into "false" and "true" images, insisting that the two halves of local farmer and national runner coexisted in Tsuburaya, he privileges the former identity as the more authentic. His essay begins with the line, "A farmer died."[17] And he concludes with Kōkichi's own concluding lines that depict an exhausted Kōkichi whose sole desire is/was to return to his parents' side. In the end, Matsunaga endows the letter to the family with more importance than the one to his superiors and coaches, thus falling into the very trap he warns against by assuming one identity to be private/authentic and the other, public/false.

TSUBURAYA AND MISHIMA, WARRIOR-SOLDIERS

In contrast, Mishima focuses only on Tsuburaya's public identity. The title of his op-ed that appeared in the conservative newspaper *Sankei shinbun* just four days after the suicide aptly summarizes his position: "Second Lieutenant Tsuburaya's suicide by sword [*jijin*]: A manly self-respect that stands alone."[18] For Mishima, Tsuburaya's identity as an SDF officer supersedes all else, his soldierly identity forged and assured by this final suicidal act. Mishima explains that in "killing off the flesh," Tsuburaya was able to give birth to the "self-respect of a soldier who values a sense of responsibility and honor. In this way, his death became the self-determination [*jiketsu*] of a soldier. That is why I title this article Second Lieutenant Tsuburaya's suicide by sword."

Not only had Tsuburaya chosen a method befitting a military man, but also an appropriate mode of writing. Mishima conspicuously ignores the note Tsuburaya wrote to his family here. Instead, it is the one addressed to his superiors that is praised for being "a truly pure suicide note" (*jitsu ni junsui na isho*). Even if its final line—"offering prayers for success at the Mexico Olympics"—merits his slight complaint that the Olympics lack a "true nobility of cause [*daigi*]," Mishima asserts that this is the closest a man can get to a "taste of glory" in this decadent age.

We can easily imagine how Mishima's defense of Tsuburaya might serve as a preemptive defense of his own suicide by sword at the SDF headquarters just two years later. He even somewhat presciently warned against indulging in critiques of the dead from the perspective of a "spectator" (*bōkansha*), writing that "I cannot forgive the ugly hubris of those people who dismiss the sublime death (*sūkō na shi*) of athlete Tsuburaya by labeling it 'neurosis' or a defeat." Instead, he insisted it was a "most beautiful, splendid death."[19] One of Mishima's own death poems would tap into this very self-image of a stoic sword-wielding warrior:

In the sounds of the	*masurao ga*
katana sheath	*tabasamu tachi no*
worn by the brave man	*saya nari ni*
enduring year after year.	*ikutose taete*
Today the first annual frost.	*kyō no hatsushimo*[20]

The year before Tsuburaya's suicide, in April and May of 1967, Mishima had gained permission to "experience enlistment" (*taiken nyūtai*) as an unofficial, unranked SDF trainee (and would also subsequently train the soldiers of his self-styled army, the Tate no kai or Shield Society, on SDF training grounds as well). He even shared a commanding officer with Tsuburaya.[21]

In the op-ed, Mishima indulges in an imaginary recreation of the setting where Tsuburaya died based on his own training experiences: "Having stayed in two or three of these myself, I can well imagine the room. The most desolate and dreary room in the world, as if from a storybook. The bare concrete floor, desk, locker, metal army-issue bed, towel draped on the bed's iron railing … . And yet, oddly enough, perfectly suited to a man's place of death." As if writing stage directions for a play, Mishima situates himself (and the reader) in that solitary, sparse space. Mishima's nostalgic praise for the stark SDF barracks suggests his own unsurprising identification with Tsuburaya as an embodiment of youthful stoic masculinity.

What is surprising here is Mishima's unqualified endorsement of Tsuburaya's stark last note to his superiors. In another essay published less than two years earlier, Mishima had been highly self-critical of an equally formulaic last will and testament that he himself had written as a young newly recruited soldier back in February 1945 when he received his draft card at age twenty. Mishima was prompted to revisit this testament in July 1966 when at the request of *Bungei shunjū* literary magazine for some "old unpublished materials," he "was surprised

to uncover from a dust-buried box in the recesses of a bookshelf a handwritten testament on a sheet of rice paper written twenty years earlier" when he believed he might die in military service. In the essay, he reproduces the text in full with one gloss to clarify his "real name" for the journal's readers:

Testament [*Yuigon*] Hiraoka Kimitake (my real name)

- Honorable Father
  Honorable Mother
  To my former Professor Shimizu and
  All the Teachers
  At Peers School and at Tokyo Imperial University
  Who kindly tutored me during my studies
  With gratitude for your considerable benevolence
- My classmates and seniors at the Peers School
  Your friendship will indeed be hard to forget
  With prayers for your glorious futures
- Younger sister Mitsuko and younger brother Chiyuki
  In place of your elder brother, devote yourselves to our honorable father and mother
  Chiyuki, you must follow your elder brother as quickly as possible
  To become a panther in the Imperial Army
  And return a fraction of our Imperial debt
  Long Live the Emperor[22]

Looking back, Mishima cringes at his "overly standardized and sanitized" writing (*amari ni mo kata ni hamarisugite iru*; *sappari shisugite iru*), horrified that this single text in an envelope with his hair and fingernail clippings might have represented or embodied him eternally: "To think that if I had died back then, I would've died just as the kind of person in this testament" (*watashi wa mattaku kono isho dōri no ningen toshite shinda wake de aru*).

Whereas Tsuburaya as an amateur nonprofessional writer and soldier has no such conflicts, Mishima points here to his inability to reconcile his soldierly and writerly identities. The divide is marked by distinct names: the testament-writing soldier Hiraoka Kimitake, which he glosses as "my real name," and the essay-writing professional Mishima Yukio. The distance between these two selves is immense. As he puts it in the essay, "The now-me [*ima no watashi*] is incredibly interested in the psychology of the then-me who wrote this [*kore o kaita toki no watashi*]. … I can't quite believe that the psychology of a young man who'd released even one single short story collection could've been so very simple."

Even so, when revisiting this writing twenty years later, Mishima refuses to disavow the text or to retrospectively blame wartime militarism or censorship.[23] He even concludes that for his "whole life this single testament will likely be plenty [*Isshō ni isho wa tabun kore ittsū de jūbun de arō*]," an ironic assertion given the sheer number of "last" texts he would, in fact, produce, as we will see in chapter 10.

In the perfunctory will and testament of the twenty-year-old Hiraoka Kimitake, he detects something lurking deep beneath the surface. His explanation of *what* constitutes that something is not entirely complete or clear, but he gestures at some larger quasi-religious presence: "a separate bigger hand that took that youth's hand and enabled such effortless writing," "something that permeated my heart and gave form to another spirit that already resided within me." While access to this external force that had the power to wake a dormant spirit was possible for the young Hiraoka in wartime, it is no longer available to the forty-year-old writer Mishima. He laments that "no matter what kind of death, such a testament written by an invisible hand can no longer possibly exist in modern-day Japan."

Just a couple of years later, he finds a contemporary exemplar in Tsuburaya's "truly pure suicide note" (*jitsu ni junsui na isho*) to his superiors. Yet as much as Mishima seems to identify himself with Tsuburaya, importantly, he also acknowledges the immense gap between them. This time, the gap is between a living reader and a dead writer. And this is the way it should be, according to Mishima:

> In order to be moved by another's death requires that I myself am alive. It is in being moved like this that life's meaning glitters all the more sharply. In order to grasp someone else's ultimate act of death requires my own complete sense of being alive.
>
> Hito no shi ni kandō suru ni wa, kochira ga ikite iru hitsuyō ga ari, sono kandō jitai ni, sei no imi ga hitokiwa surudoku hirameku. Sono yō na tanin no zen-teki na kōi de aru shi o uketomeru ni wa, kochira no zen-teki na sei o motte shinakute wa naranai kara de aru.

It is not desirable or possible for the living to align themselves too closely with the dead. Nor should the living presume to judge them from across the divide as "a spectator" (*bōkansha*). Instead, Mishima suggests that it is only by fully grasping our own status as living beings that we might understand them, and ourselves. In writing about Tsuburaya, it seems that Mishima was both indulging in a fantasy of identification with the dead, but just as importantly, one in which he could identify himself as alive by contrast.

KAWABATA AND TSUBURAYA: OLD WRITING HACKS AND NOVICE HIGH STYLISTS

If Mishima focused on the public persona embodied in Tsuburaya's more public letter, Kawabata engaged only with the poetics of the personal note to his family. Unlike Mishima, he quickly dispenses with any discussion of Tsuburaya's suicide after the first sentence. And unlike his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm later that year, Kawabata is here uninterested in the morality of suicide, or even in the act itself.[24] It is only the act of writing that concerns him.

What especially moved Kawabata was the note's rhythmic aurality. As Kawabata had claimed elsewhere, ideal literary prose should be "understood perfectly

when one hears it read aloud."[25] Appraising Tsuburaya's note, he celebrated it for "the hackneyed phrase 'was delicious,' repeated after each and every person and food item, [that] truly breathes pure life. It imbues the entire note with rhythm. A beautiful, sincere, sorrowful echo."[26]

For Kawabata, such raw and simple prose was the purview of amateur writers and largely inaccessible to an old professional like himself. Paradoxically, only amateurs like "runner Tsuburaya" (*senshu Tsuburaya*), the appellation used by Kawabata throughout the essay, have access to such powerful prose. "The runner Tsuburaya is neither a writer nor a high stylist. And yet it is precisely for these reasons that he could give birth to prose like this. … In the face of the runner Tsuburaya's note, a literary hack like myself [*uribun no kakari de aru watashi*] can only feel pained with embarrassment thinking of my own prose. But fortunately, the positives outweigh the negatives; I do not only take myself to task and despair, but rather am comforted and given a sense of hope" (294).

Kawabata's positive evaluation of Tsuburaya's prose here coincides with his own "self-critical" and even self-described "masochistic" reflection about his own writing. His comments appear in the context of a longer article in which he looks back at his most famous work, "Izu no odoriko" ("The Izu Dancer") with fondness and regret in equal measure.[27]

If there is one thread that connects this rather meandering essay written over the course of eighteen months, it is the question of what kind of textual immortality will endure in the face of bodily mortality. The answer is in his title: "One Flower (*Issō ikka*): The Author of 'The Izu Dancer,'" the work that he half-fears and half-hopes will define him forevermore. He notes that other authors have suffered similar fates. In one installment that appeared six months before Tsuburaya's death, Kawabata relates a story about returning from the funeral of his contemporary, the author Tsuboi Sakae, most famous for her novel-turned-film *Nijū-shi no hitomi* (*Twenty-Four Eyes*).[28] A conversation with his taxi driver infuriates him as he realizes that he too "will sure enough end up as the author of 'The Izu Dancer'" (272). Returning to this subject in the penultimate installment of the lengthy essay, Kawabata elaborates on his ambivalence: "Until right now, I haven't had a thought about what place or meaning 'The Izu Dancer' will occupy in my life as a writer, or among my works. Until writing this, I had never even considered that only 'The Izu Dancer' will continue to be read, and that only as its author will I continue to be known for a while after I have died. Even thinking about this now seems unreal, and so I am neither sad nor happy. But it may indeed happen" (314–15).

Despite his chagrin at the many faults he finds in his old story, what redeems it in his eyes are precisely the qualities he praises in Tsuburaya's suicide note: its "expression of honest, simple gratitude" (296–97). Reflecting on this work enables Kawabata a return to the writer and young man he was forty-two years earlier. Like Tsuburaya who died at age twenty-seven, Kawabata was twenty-seven years old when he wrote "Izu Dancer," well before the corruption of age and literary professionalization could mar his prose.

Writing this essay about Tsuburaya at age sixty-nine, Kawabata is now grappling with his own aging body and with the effects of aging on his writing. He recognizes that writing changes along with the aging body, though not necessarily for the better. Technical perfection comes at a cost, and he depicts himself as resisting these natural changes with all his might: "For literary writers, as they age, even if their prose deteriorates, their handwriting [*sho*, 書] … inevitably improves. But I hope to fight against these natural changes in my handwriting and in my prose and instead strive to maintain its pathetic state" (295).[29] The "pathetic" (*asamashii*) imperfect hand of the young amateur is preferable.

What is Kawabata saying here about writing in the face of death? He depicts writing as an embodied act that cannot be severed from the writer's physical body. This helps explain why he discusses both prose and calligraphy in this essay. Writing offers a metonymical substitute for the body of the writer, especially as death approaches. "When a person turns sixty years of age, they invariably become capable of writing. Even if their handwriting (*moji*) is clumsy, it becomes accomplished in its own way. It is at this very point that death comes a-visiting (*shi ga otozurete kuru*). Most people become able to write proper characters adeptly just before dying. This is how we know the terror of writing [*ji no osoroshisa*]" (295).

It is, of course, impossible to know with any certainty about the rationale behind Kawabata's own choices when "death came a-visiting." But if there is some perfection that inevitably comes at the moment of death (and this is a bad thing according to Kawabata), it also might explain why he did not write in those final moments.

Although Kawabata left behind no suicide note when he died on April 16, 1972, he was famous for writing in the wake of other people's deaths.[30] He wrote so many eulogies and obituaries for his fellow writers that his nickname was "the undertaker." What might explain his eagerness to write about another's death given his refusal to do so in the case of his own?

Literary scholar Makoto Ueda helpfully connects Kawabata's own penchant for elegiac writing—both obituaries for his fellow writers and his fiction filled with dying and dead characters—to his preference for the simple unadorned prose of "artless" (*takumanai*) amateurs, like Tsuburaya. He theorizes that Kawabata became a eulogist in order to give voice to the final moments of privileged vision afforded to the "dying eyes" (*matsugo no me*) of a person who lacks the necessary expressive powers: "A dead person reports nothing. … Nearness to death may give a person an extraordinary ability to see, but it takes away from him the ability to express what he sees."[31] Only the exceptional individual might achieve both. For Kawabata, Akutagawa was one such exception among professional writers. Otherwise, he credited this purity of vision as the purview of "artless" amateurs, young "maidens" and children especially.

If this privileged vision and its expression are restricted to youthful amateurs and to those staring death in the face, then Tsuburaya doubly qualifies. Usually, these amateurs required assistance from one who possessed "the literary skill to

articulate what they see. … A little child had to be helped out by a composition teacher; a young woman, by a ghost writer; and a dying man, by a funeral orator."[32] In contrast, the runner Tsuburaya had singlehandedly scripted this most moving maiden, and final, work.

But what about the elderly writer Kawabata's own choices when facing death himself? We might be tempted to conclude that he believed that looming death could return the writer to a childlike state in which a purity of vision and prose returns to these "eyes in their last extremity." But is this possible for an aged professional writer like himself? When Kawabata wrote about this privileged vantage point in 1933, he himself was thirty-one and was discussing the suicide note of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke at age thirty-five. As a sixty-nine-year-old writing about Tsuburaya in 1968, it is seemingly only as a reader and critic of another's deathbed writings that enables his vicarious and nostalgic return.

At this point, writing about the young runner Tsuburaya offers Kawabata an opportunity not only to revisit his past youthful writing self but also to imagine his posthumous literary legacy. "The Izu Dancer" looms large in envisioning both. Just as Kawabata suspected, this single text would survive and serve to represent him. A communal literary grave (*Bungakusha no haka*) in Shizuoka Prefecture, created under the aegis of the Japanese Writers' Association in 1969, memorializes famous authors alongside the title of their most representative work. One grave and one literary title for each.

In the end, Kawabata left behind no single final text to stand as his last word. He refused any final glimpse of the world through his own dying eyes. Instead, we are left with his elegiac prose written about, and for, others. It is through Kawabata's essay on Tsuburaya's suicide note and on his own youthful writings that we can get sidelong glimpses of both men, the young amateur writer-runner and the aged professional writing in the face of death. This is a highly refracted and filtered look that entangles self and other, present and past, writer and reader. It also entangles fiction and a suicide note. We might seek him, as he anticipated, in his "one flower," but it is worth remembering the ways this singular literary title was also, in his mind and in his writings, entangled with the final words of another.

DIALOGUING WITH THE DEAD: THE ETHICS OF THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF SUICIDE NOTES

Kawabata openly acknowledges the tricky ethical implications of treating another's death writings as if it were a literary critical exercise. He prefaces his comments about Tsuburaya with this caveat: "At any rate, since it is a suicide note [*nanishiro isho de aru kara*], I will restrain from lodging disparaging criticisms [*karisome no ronpyō*]." As he notes self-consciously, "I realize it's not pretty to say that a suicide note gives me hope, but it is true that even a literary hack like myself was able to discover truth and possibility in its prose." In the next month's installment,

he worries that "categorizing runner Tsuburaya's suicide note as a representative example of prose" was "indefensible and unscrupulous" (293, 294, 296). Even as Kawabata continues to write, he repeatedly returns to the ethical bind of undertaking these acts of reading, interpreting, and writing in response to another's self-willed death and to their "exemplary" death writings.

In contemplating the "right" way to write one's death, these professional writers were all engaged in an act of literary criticism. As I suggested above, this often reveals more about the critic than the one being analyzed. Matsunaga, a poet and critic best known for his collection of farmers' poems *Nihon nōmin shi shi* (A history of Japan's farmer poems, 1967–70), sees Tsuburaya as a farmer. Mishima sees his double, a warrior soldier whose method of suicide transcends his stated cause. Kawabata sees his antithesis—a young amateur writer whose prose is authentic and pure, rather than the aged, mature professional whose writing inevitably "improves" as death approaches.

In responding to the suicide of another, Mishima and Kawabata were also, by implication, prefiguring their own. Through the figure of this young soldier-marathoner-amateur writer, they also figured their own self-death and its self-writing. What they valued in another's final writing did not, as we have seen, translate into any simplistic imitation. Whereas Mishima focused on Tsuburaya's decisive suicidal method, Kawabata praised only his writing. Paradoxically though, it was Kawabata who would refuse to write any final self-defining text—fictional or otherwise—while Mishima, as we will see in chapter 10, left behind so very many to parse.

It is tempting to see in these long trains of writings a means by which writers were talking *about* and *to* themselves, as well as each other. Each speaks backward and forward in time entangling their own deaths and death writings with those of another. Not only do both Mishima and Kawabata each write about Tsuburaya in 1968, but after Mishima's death two years later, Kawabata would write and speak out as well. In a memorial essay published in January 1971, Kawabata acknowledged the ways that the death of someone close to us forces us to reflect on our relationship with them and on our own impending deaths. Reckoning our relations with the dead is also, he wrote, a means of "preparing for our own deaths [*jibun no shi no kakugo*]." He adds, "I find myself thinking about this every time someone close to me dies. And this has been all too often. It is so very frequent as to make me want to say that the only way to avoid facing this sorrow at another person's death is to die myself."[33]

In a sense, Mishima's death spurs Kawabata to contemplate his own. This is not to imply any simple causality linking the two men's suicides. His pain is palpable at the loss of his young "Mishima-kun," but Kawabata is also speaking more generally about mourning the dead. As he explains, he initially wrote these words back in 1945 in response to the death of another writer—Kataoka Teppei—and revisits them now in the wake of Mishima's. His comments poignantly suggest that

Kawabata felt the cascading implications of another's death on those who survive and the complicated obligations imposed on the living by the dead. As manga artist Okamoto Ippei put it in his 1927 essay on *isho*, "When dying, one looks outside of oneself to another and leaves behind a word laden with responsibility. Therein lies the powerful connection of human beings to all things in the universe."[34] These obligations and complications can be all the more intense when it is a premeditated self-death that severs the connections between oneself and another.

After Mishima's suicide, Kawabata questioned his own right to speak or write in his stead. Modeling the very same self-restraint he asks of his listeners and readers, he concludes his memorial essay with this line, "—Regarding Mishima-kun's act of dying [*shi no kōdō*], at this point, I wish to remain silent."[35]

Similarly, in his brief funeral address on January 24, 1971, Kawabata denied any right "to speak here about Mishima's literature or ideology or actions" or to presume to know anything about death when he "does not yet understand life." Speaking across the divide, he suggests, is mere hubris. He continues: "Much has been said and written about Mishima, but he can no longer respond, not even with a single word. He cannot write a single line. You can think that pitiable, or enviable."

In the wake of a self-willed silence, is silence then the only possible ethical response? Kawabata suggests as much when he wonders in frustration, "What is burial, this act where the living bury the dead?" and proposes that instead we might do better to follow "the saying, let the dead bury the dead."[36] His remarks beg the question, How to respond to—much less engage in literary criticism of—something as raw and personal as a suicide note?

I turn now to one last writer-critic who took up the mantle of being a literary critic of *isho* with gusto. In an essay from 1978, the iconoclastic Nosaka Akiyuki does not hesitate to praise, dissertate, berate, and mock *isho* written by both professional men of letters and amateurs, from Fujimura Misao at the turn of the century to his contemporaries, Tsuburaya and Mishima. As such, his essay offers a useful review and overview of many texts already discussed above. His unfiltered critique also gives a clearer sense of the criteria by which writings left behind are often more implicitly and, without a doubt, less stridently judged.

NOSAKA AKIYUKI AND THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF SUICIDE NOTES

In his 1978 essay, Nosaka Akiyuki half-jokingly notes, "I'm no literary critic of *isho* [*isho hyōronka*]," but proceeds to be just that.[37] Nosaka brings together everyone from Fujimura Misao and Mori Ōgai to Dazai Osamu and his disciple Tanaka Hidemitsu, from elite kamikaze pilot student-soldiers and farmer-soldier conscripts to his own grandmother. Having left no *isho* behind, Kawabata himself is exempt from Nosaka's praise or criticism here. His central focus is articulated in the essay's title: "Isho: Tsuburaya no jitsu, Mishima no uro"

(Isho: Tsuburaya's substance, Mishima's emptiness). Even as his title points to the stark contrast between the taciturn amateur runner and the prolific professional, Nosaka advances a surprisingly flattering reading of both that is based on his own highly selective accounting of these two men's last writings.

Writing at the age of fifty-eight, Nosaka Akiyuki had little to no personal connection with any of the literary men or soldiers whose last writings he evaluates with the eyes of a discerning critic. Nor was he that close to death (he did not die until 2015, at age eighty-five, of natural causes.) And yet he too was spurred to write this essay by the prospect of his own mortality as well as his discomfiting realization that any texts he left behind would be sifted and sorted, published and publicized. He opens by recalling with disgust an anecdote about his publisher requesting "an *isho* to include among his literary letters" just one month after he underwent a serious operation for what he feared was stomach cancer. Although he does not mention the contents of his own *isho* here, he later included this essay in a collection titled *Boku no shi no junbi* (My preparations for death). For Nosaka, too, the death writings of others offer a way to contemplate his own. Like a memento mori, these last writings offer readers this opportunity as well; as the book jacket cover urges us, "At times, think upon your death!" (*Toki ni, shi o kangaetamae*).

Tsuburaya's note to his family is once again judged to be the gold standard of *isho*. Like Kawabata, Nosaka praises its authentic childlike attentiveness to sensory bodily experiences and its prolix repetition that gives it the rhetorical power of "an awesome curse or exorcism" (141). And again, Nosaka dismissively catalogues the efforts of the vast majority of literary professionals like himself. He offers two explanations for why novelists fail at writing last letters whereas amateurs succeed: one, novelists are simply too used to being choosy about their words, dispensing with the kinds of mundane everyday inquiries about health and weather that give nonprofessionals' writings a sense of "truth" and "a concrete affirmation of life"; and two, writers can express or sublimate their feelings of dissatisfaction in their writings. This is what he calls "paying off their resentment in installments." For novelists, literary works offer an outlet so no pent-up anguish can emerge in a final and virginal maiden work. To Nosaka, such a work is "superfluous" for "literary writers write last letters all through the year" (147).

Nosaka launches a ruthless critique of his fellow writers one after the other. Mori Ōgai's terse final instructions to engrave his given name rather than his literary penname (associated with his status as an Imperial army physician) on his tomb "fail to affirm life in the way that Tsuburaya's bean jam cakes do." Literary men whose last writings are means to comfort themselves disappoint like a "bounced check," whether they are Futabatei Shimei's last words penned on his deathbed while abroad, Miyazawa Kenji's earnest Buddhist prayer, or Kikuchi Kan's drunk ramblings. Tanaka Hidemitsu earns his scorn for the "chaotic and dishonest" example he inscribed into Dazai's collected works and for pretentiously

identifying himself as a "novelist" (*shōsetsu-kaki*). Like Fujimura Misao, the young symbolist poet Haraguchi Tōzō (discussed below in chapter 9) produced final works filled with the natural arrogance of youth, but Nosaka speculates that such naive sentiments likely have him "turning over in his grave today." Although Akutagawa's famous last note escapes overt criticism, Nosaka lumps him together with authors who fail where amateurs succeed because they have "paid off their resentment in installments" in their literary works (144–48).

Only when they dispose of their literary pretensions and resort to wholly mundane language do these literati merit Nosaka's half-hearted praise. For example, he semi-approvingly cites Futabatei and Iwano Hōmei, who wrote as if hastily scribbling a terse memo to their wives in the margins of the household account book.[38]

For Nosaka, novelists, who make their living *from* words, paradoxically lack the power to convey true emotions *with* their final words. Like caged parrots who are so used to mimicking humans that they will cry out using human language amid their birdlike cries when facing a cat predator, authors resort to the artificial languages acquired from their many years spent as literary writers, even when facing the crisis of death. Their privileged status as "wordsmiths" (*kotoba no senmonka*) denies them access to authentic expression rooted in sensory bodily experience; as Nosaka puts it, novelists "aren't eatin' bean jam rice cakes" (*bota-mochi o kutte inai*) (147). Such simple last writings are limited to the amateurs: Tsuburaya, WWII farmer-soldier conscripts who merely bid their loved ones "Take care not to catch cold" or "Watch out for fires" (142–43), or Nosaka's own grandmother. She died in excruciating poverty in the immediate postwar with just a few grains of white rice, charcoal, and seven ten-yen bills along with some indecipherable address tucked under her mattress. Nosaka notes her that example might not be categorized as an *isho* per se but are traces that offer a "vivid message" (141).

His praise is reserved for these less literate amateurs with one curious, glaring exception: Mishima Yukio. Nosaka's stance toward Mishima at first appears ambivalent, especially compared to his unqualified praise for Tsuburaya. He calls Mishima's manifesto—the written version of the speech that he delivered orally before the SDF forces after taking a hostage and one that he pre-circulated to Japanese reporters—"mannered" with its "clichéd wording [*kimarikitta kotoba*] constraining and yet condensing its sentiments [*gyaku ni, omoi o tojikomete shimau*]" (146). At the same time, Mishima's manifesto is upheld as one possible, if imperfect, choice for literary men who insist upon writing *isho*.[39]

Among Mishima's many last writings, what merits Nosaka's highest praise on par with the young marathoner is this death poem (*jisei*):

In a world that loathes	*chiru o itou*
petals that would fall	*yo nimo hito nimo*
before all the others,	*sakigakete*
the flower that rushes ahead.	*chiru koso hana to*
A gale blowing in the eve.	*fuku sayokaze*[40]

Unsurprisingly, he ignores Mishima's other death poem with its martial tones that ran contrary to Nosaka's leftist pacifist politics. What is surprising here is his praise for both Mishima's nine-page manifesto filled with political rhetoric alongside this rather conventional *waka* poem. These would seem to be completely antithetical to one another and to Tsuburaya's simple prose.

What they all share, however, is the use of clichéd expressions. If Mishima's taps a familiar political rhetoric, on the one hand, and a high poetic tradition, on the other, Tsuburaya's indulges in "tedious repetition [*kudokudoshii kurikaeshi*] of 'thank you' and '… was delicious'" (141). Nosaka expresses a preference for this kind of simple language that, like farmer-soldiers' last letters, are filled with mundane expressions of concern for those they are leaving behind. They shine, he claims, especially compared to those penned by elite student-soldiers like those collected in *Kike wadatsumi koe* (*Listen to the Voices from the Sea*, 1949) that include lofty Buddhist phrases like "fallen flowers" (*sange*). Of course, Mishima's poem is filled with just such lofty phrases of ephemerality. Why then does it nonetheless escape Nosaka's critique and even merit his praise? Perhaps precisely because its imagery is so very generic to its medium.[41]

It is their empty, and even trite, nature that enables these words to affect a reader in an emotionally powerful way. "For novelists who prattle on with empty words [*utsuro na kotoba*, 虚の言葉], leaving behind a final testament that is truly empty is entirely appropriate. Is this not, in fact, their 'true value'"? (148). His essay title—"Isho: Tsuburaya's substance (実), Mishima's emptiness (虚)"—might seem to suggest an unabashed critique of the latter in favor of the former. But with these terms, Nosaka is evoking a long-lived philosophical and literary debate about sincerity/fictionality, truth/falsehood, substance/emptiness only to dismiss these dichotomies in the end.[42] At the conclusion of his essay, he offers his unqualified endorsement of both writers and of both kinds of writings:

> Both the truth or concreteness of Tsuburaya and the falsehood or emptiness of Mishima overflow with true emotion. Each disappears little by little, leaving those of us left behind with a feeling of the chill fog in the fields of Adashi. (148)

Here he is invoking the famous line from Yoshida Kenkō's 1330 *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*) that espouses the virtues of ephemerality: "If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino … but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us!"[43] The sensory power of both Tsuburaya's and Mishima's writings derives from their ability to mark absence in language, in the ephemeral words left behind by the people who leave us behind.