Autothanatography, or the Exorbitant Call to Write One's Own Death

Etō Jun and Yamada Hanako

As we have seen thus far, the writings left behind were often addressed to another person whose identity was made explicit to varying degrees: Akutagawa's anonymous "old friend," wife, or friends Oana and Kikuchi; Tsuburaya's mostly unnamed SDF superiors and coaches or his thirty-one family members specified by name or relationship. Even with such targeted recipients, delimiting that audience often became impossible after its writer's death. Equally important to remember is how the writer, too, was a potential reader-audience for the text before their suicide. Nowhere was this doubled role for the author more explicitly signaled than in Kishigami's "Note for myself," although this one too contained many explicit call-outs to many others.

To summarize this point, notes addressed to others can also be (or become) ones for many others and/or for oneself; conversely, even a "note for oneself" can be for another, or even for many others. Depicting a figure of oneself sometime before that self is to be killed can simultaneously be for oneself writing (and reading) before dying as well as for others who will undertake an act of reading in the wake of that death. As such, this entails an especially complicated relationship between self and other, one that is often acknowledged in these texts with their expressions of thanks, apologies, and indebtedness, on the one hand, or lingering resentments and demands. Texts left behind necessarily straddle multiple poles, audiences, and temporalities. As much as there is a reckoning between self and other in these texts, there is often also the sense that the self *is* the other whom one is addressing and regarding in these last writings.

As a genre that foretells one's death, the suicide note might be considered the counterpart of an autobiography that records one's life. In *Regard for the*

Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, & Wilde, E. S. Burt argues that autobiography, writing the living self, is intimately concerned with the writing of one's own death, or what has been called autothanatography: "Autobiography is aporetic, not or not only a matter of a subject strategizing with language to produce an exemplary identity but a matter also of its responding to an exorbitant call to write its death."[1] Both genres are rife with logical contradictions and pervaded by a shared sense of alterity, or the inevitable estrangement of the writing self and the written self. Even as this act of representation might seek to collapse these two states of being, the gaps remain between the text and the life—or death—of its author.

If representing something from one's past (or present) is tricky, something that will happen in the future is even trickier. It is still all the more so when that something is our own deaths, "the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable," as André Bazin has so nicely put it.[2] In the case of the self-writing/reading of self-death, the complications multiply. To adapt Mishima's phrasing upon rereading his own youthful testament, there is a "now-me writing" (*kore o kaite iru ima no watashi*) who regards both this past writing self (*kore o kaita toki no watashi*), as well as a future dying or dead one (*shinu/shinda/shinde iru toki no watashi*). Autobiography is said to possess a "specular structure … in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding."[3] If so, what happens when the dying author declares their own dead self the subject of that understanding and when the living (and writing) self pronounces on a soon-to-be dead self? What kind of exemplary identities are produced, and what kinds of strategizing with language does this necessitate?

What emerges is often a doubled voice and vision, a first-person embodied subjectivity (that is not necessarily articulated in the first-person) and a third-person other.[4] We saw this above in the moments when Tsuburaya Kōkichi refers to himself in the third person with his final plaintive cry of exhaustion and desire to return to his parents' side, or when the narrator of Akutagawa's posthumously published "Dialogue in darkness" urges "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke! Akutagawa Ryūnosuke … you start again," or when Akutagawa and Kishigami regard their own dying form with anticipatory horror and delight. Multiple sets of eyes "regard the other" here, and that other is none other than the self. But that self is presented here only to mark its prospective absence.

The complicated ambivalence this engenders is perhaps best exemplified in Kishigami's last poem. In darkness, it submerges its speaker-writer, who appears simultaneously as the (unstated) subject and object of this depiction:

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!*

A hidden writing-self cloaked and enclosed in darkness is both depicted and erased in a final writing marking this moment.[5]

The moment of self-death itself, however, is always in the offing. For the writer, it is necessarily a textualized, imagined event in the future rather than an embodied experience from the past. It is worth stressing that for the reader, too, even in retrospect, the suicide of another comes in the form of a mediating text. As such, fiction comes to bear even in these writings that so uncomfortably come to replicate their writer's own self-death. Perhaps this explains why Terayama Shūji claimed that suicide is always "storified," whether "one's own or another's" and "whether fictional or factual."[6]

In the next and last section of this book, part 3, "Mourning in Multimedia," I turn to discuss more overtly fictionalized self-representations of suicide, including the self-eulogizing poetry of Nagasawa Nobuko and Haraguchi Tōzō (in chapter 9) and Mishima's penchant for textualizing, visualizing, enacting, and modeling his own eventual suicide by seppuku in photographs, stories, and films (in chapter 10). Before moving on to these examples, I examine two more recent cases of *isho* here: Etō Jun (1932–99), one of Japan's foremost literary critics and postwar conservative intellectuals, and the young indie manga artist Yamada Hanako (1967–92).

As I hope to show, this unlikely pair demonstrates considerable continuity in their strategies for writing self-death. Etō's clipped and solicitous prose in his suicide note is a far cry from Yamada's own prolix and dense prose, much less her manga panels filled with dark, scathing remarks and sentiments. Yet both kill off the self in their writings in a harbinger of their own suicides, figuring a splintered "self" who is alternatively a speaking, writing, seeing, and/or dying subject or object, or sometimes even simultaneously all at once.

THE SUICIDE NOTE OF A LITERARY CRITIC: ETŌ JUN

On July 21, 1999, the literary and cultural critic Etō Jun left behind one short note before taking his life. He responded to the exorbitant call to write his own death with an exorbitant demand of his own in his short three-line suicide note left on his desk:

> The crippling of mind and body progresses, the torments of sickness hard to bear. Etō Jun after an attack of cerebral infraction this past June 10th is no more than a shell, and this is why I resolved on my own to put an end to this shell. I beg you, ladies and gentlemen, please be able to understand!
>
> Heisei 11 [1999] July 21
>
> Etō Jun

> 心身の不自由は進み、病苦が堪え難し。去る六月十日、脳梗塞の発作に遭いし以来の江藤淳は形骸に過ぎず、自ら処決して形骸を断ずる所以なり。乞う、諸君よ、これを諒とせられよ。
>
> 平成十一年七月二十一日
>
> 江藤　淳[7]

Etō's suicide note possesses a complex narrative perspective that suggests strategizing mightily with language. It echoes some strategies we have already seen while forging some new ones of its own.

The note posits Etō Jun as both speaking/acting subject and object. Albeit on an entirely different register than the young marathoner Tsuburaya's with its neoclassical literary verb endings and precise medical terminology, Etō's note lacks any "I" language, even for sensorial descriptions of bodily and mental pain and suffering (although again, I have inserted them above in my translation for readability). The choice to elide the self here is especially conspicuous for a writer who had repetitively inscribed an "I" into his literary criticism—*Amerika to watashi* (1965), *Inu to watashi* (1966), *Bungaku to watashi, Sengo to watashi* (1974), and *Hihyō to watashi* (1987)—and in his memoir about caretaking for his ill wife in her final months and days, *Tsuma to watashi* (May 1999).

The publication of this memoir just months before his death led most commentators to interpret his act as a love suicide after the loss of his beloved wife (*ato-ōi shinjū*). Ishihara Shintarō, for example, commented, "It was a double love suicide following after her. Once you see it like that, there is nothing to do but simply accept it. He was able to do it because he is a Japanese. Is it not beautiful? There's nothing more to say."[8] In fact, there is a good deal more that we might say (and much more that *was* said), especially since his wife is nowhere explicitly mentioned in his last note despite widespread reports to the contrary.[9] Instead, there is a concentrated focus on a self, but a complicated one that toggles between being a third-person object and a first-person subject. His penname becomes especially key to this oscillation.

Etō uses his third-person proper (pen)name at the moment when he is describing being reduced to "no more than a shell," offering an apt description of his utter self-evacuation. The speaking subject only emerges after this point with the self-determined resolution (*onozura shoketsu shite*, 自ら処決して) to act on this shell. Although the direct address in the final lines is devoid of any first-person pronouns, the speaking subject comes to the fore here in his pleading, doubly emphatic demand for his readers' acceptance:

> [I] beg you, ladies and gentlemen, please be able to understand!

> 乞う、諸君よ、これを諒とせられよ。

> Kō, shokun yo, kore o ryō to serareyo.

There is a clear call here to the reader to participate in the day of reckoning that Etō, as a high-profile public intellectual, surely knew would follow upon his suicide. Indeed, his suicide and his suicide note would be published, read, and judged extensively.[10] The note was reproduced and cited in the press ad infinitum with fetishistic attention to its handwritten materiality (the number of boxes of the *genkōyōshi* paper he had taken up, the color of ink, etc.). It was frequently

republished complete with a *rubi* gloss for the less literate contemporary audience, an especially ironic situation considering Etō's vocal critique of the impoverished state of national language education in the postwar.[11]

His colleagues and friends answered his call with equal urgency and produced volumes of commentary, most notably a September 1999 special issue of *Bungakukai* that included memorials by luminaries such as the philosopher Yoshimoto Taka'aki, literary critic Karatani Kōjin, author Ōba Minako, then-Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō, as well as Japanese literature scholars Edwin McClellan and Paul Anderer. Like the premodern death rituals described by Gary Ebersole in his *Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan*, here were "public performances following the death of a high-ranking figure" that have political and emotional meaning for the participants.[12] Again, ritual mourning activity is associated with patrons and poets; whereas once the needs of imperial poetry collections dictated the selections, here contemporary publishing houses ensure the obligatory participation of the elites. As many of the *Bungakukai* essays attest, within hours of the news of Etō's suicide, writers were besieged with phone calls and faxes demanding their immediate response.

His childhood friend, the radio announcer Kobayashi Kango, most explicitly responded to Etō's call in his memorial essay, titled "Egashira Atsuo-kun, Kimi no shi o ryō to suru" (Egashira Atsuo, I forgive you). Its final lines read, "Egashira-kun, and so, I tell you here and now that I forgive you. Ega-chan, Egashira Atsuo-kun. Sa—yo—na—ra."[13] The insistent use of Etō's birthname here is conspicuous, especially given the fact that all the other respondents refer to him by his penname, as does Etō himself.

What makes Etō's own choice especially striking is the fact that he had explicitly rejected the idea of having his penname etched onto his gravestone. In a roundtable discussion in March 1998, he explained, "I write using the penname Etō Jun because I have not the slightest intention of putting my bones in a grave marked Etō Jun."[14] Why then mark his last writing by that very same penname? Why might the same nomenclature not serve both his gravestone and his suicide note? If, as De Man claims, the authority of the autobiographical genre stems from its being "rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name," how to interpret Etō's use of his proper (pen)name here in this autothanatography?[15]

One possible explanation was to signal the death of that public figure. This was the explanation offered by Yoshimoto Taka'aki in his memorial essay for Etō. He argues that Etō was insisting on dying as a private man rather than a public intellectual, like Mori Ōgai before him. In Ōgai's final testament dated just three days before his death in 1922, the author and Imperial Army surgeon general had famously called for a posthumous repudiation of his public identity as Meiji statesman. He expressed a "wish to die Mori Rintarō of Iwami" and to be buried as such: "All I want written on my grave are the words 'The Grave of Mori Rintarō'; not a

single word more."[16] As noted in chapter 3, his tombstone is positioned catty-corner from Dazai Osamu's in Zenrinji Temple in Mitaka and is engraved as per his request. In a similar fashion, Etō's own note was a willful obliteration of the "ornamented" public self, or what Yoshimoto called "self-delimitation" (*jiko gentei*).[17]

Etō had suggested as much in that earlier March 1998 roundtable discussion when he railed against the prospect of erecting any posthumous literary memorial stones, museums, or prizes in his name. He explained that the literary establishment will have to make do with "a single writing brush" placed into the communal grave for literary writers in Shizuoka. Rather than the remains of Egashira Atsuo, which were to be housed in his family grave in Aoyama Cemetery, there will lie "only a single writing brush that [I] used until the very end, which itself will decay so that only the smallest bit of metal will remain in the end."[18] Etō here offers a semi-permanent material substitute for his writing body (and his body of writings) but denies the body of the writer in this literary gravesite.

In Etō's suicide note, too, there is little private self in evidence. Instead of Egashira, there is only the writer, as signaled by the penname Etō Jun. As he explained in that earlier roundtable discussion, a penname marks "the definitive gap between the real-life 'I' and the literary 'I.'"[19] In the note, it is exclusively this literary self that appears to participate in the public reckoning of this public persona.

Significantly, though, Etō signs his note by the very name whose identity is being obliterated. Unlike Ōgai, who signed his testament Mori Rintarō when insisting that this nomenclature alone remain, Etō signs off with the (pen)name he declares is being disposed. Instead of a singular identity being killed off, there are two Etō Juns: the Etō Jun who, ever since his stroke, is already "no more than a shell" and another Etō Jun who writes of his decision to put an end to this shell. Etō's ending with a reiteration of his proper (pen)name is both a declamation of that identity and its decimation. In the end, the authorial identity is shored up even as it is being pronounced dead.

The author is dead; long live the author.

THE SUICIDE DIARIES AND DIARY-MANGA OF THE YOUNG INDIE MANGA ARTIST YAMADA HANAKO

The twenty-four-year-old manga artist Yamada Hanako (1967–92) left behind no suicide note before leaping to her death from the eleventh-story roof of the Tokyo suburban apartment complex where she and her family had lived when she was growing up. Her family was left to sift through over twenty volumes of her diaries, manga sketchbooks, and story ideas crammed onto the pages of her notebooks. In these, her entries are often marked with numbered bullet points that are filled with nonlinear thinking and writing, as well as parenthetical snide, and even hateful, remarks aimed at herself and others. Deciphering any final messages, if there were any to be found, fell mostly to her father, a car salesman by trade.

FIGURE 24. Yamada's cramped handwritten scrawls and dense drawings neatly repackaged as *A Diary Just before Suicide*. Cover image of Yamada Hanako, *Jisatsu chokuzen nikki: Kanzenban* (Tokyo: Ōta Shuppan, 1998). Courtesy Ōta Shuppan.

He would publish them under the title *Jisatsu chokuzen nikki*, or *A Diary Just before Suicide*, in 1996 through Ōta Shuppan, the same publisher of Tsurumi's *The Complete Manual of Suicide* (fig. 24). This work, too, achieved bestseller status that summer, propelling her father to try his own hand at being a writer afterward. As he explained in the book's preface, the job required some heavy editing, deleting, and reordering to make it legible in order "to convey what Yumi・Yamada Hanako wanted to say to her family, her lovers, and her editors by publishing the diary in her stead." What he claims justifies his project is that Yamada herself acknowledged (in her diary) that "'my works are documentaries, diary manga [*nikki manga*].' Since she published her own diaries bit by bit turning them into her works, her diary itself should be called her 'magnum opus.'"[20]

What are we to make of this kind of posthumous publication and the stated rationale for undertaking such work? Is reproducing her words there—and here too—an important act of recovery or is it inevitably ethically compromised?

When reflecting on his involvement in a similar project publishing the excerpted diaries and draft poems of the young aspiring poet Saeki Masako, who drowned herself in Kiyomizu Park pond at age twenty-two on March 12, 1948, the novelist Fujiguchi Tōgo reassured himself, writing, "Her body has perished, but I felt the responsibility to make her live on, and so I organized her records. I believe the only path to her living on is to make her pains widely known, or even known just to another single young person." Seven handwritten volumes of her diaries, poems, songs, and impressions were collated and edited into a single thirty-four-page chapter in a volume titled *Ai wa kanashikariki* (The sorrows of love) and released in a small, six-thousand-copy print run.

For Fujiguchi, Saeki's choice to destroy her body was what compelled him to preserve her body of works—but as he admits here, not without his own editorial interventions as an amanuensis. With her parents' permission, Fujiguchi excerpted and edited the text "to omit redundancies and to compensate with his editorial brush the parts that were confused and not put as they should be, either due to her excitable emotions or lack of literary skill." Marveling at the resulting product, he imagines "Saeki-kun rejoicing underground" (*Saeki-kun mo chika de yorokonde kurete iru to omou*).[21] Saeki's suicide note, if it can be called that, appeared in her final diary entry written on the day before her death. It ends with a plaintive plea to her closest friend and her mother for their forgiveness. In response, this friend was sympathetic if less than completely forgiving in a short memorial piece she penned and titled "Saeki-san no baka" (Saeki's stupidity).[22]

Those left behind are left with the complicated task in the aftermath of a suicide of sifting through the remains. As we saw above with the case of Akutagawa (and as we will see with Mishima in part 3), these complications are exacerbated when there is no single self-designated text left behind but instead so very many competing versions, especially when they uneasily intermix fictional and nonfictional

mediums. In the case of female writers, there are often added gender politics involved with such posthumous publication projects.

The example of the manga artist Nekojiru, a contemporary of Yamada's who also died by suicide in May 1998, further illustrates this point. Nekojiru, or "Cat Soup," is the penname for this indie manga artist famed for her twin cats Nyako and Nyata, whose innocent wide-eyed expressions, modeled after *maneki-neko*, the good luck cats often found in Japanese shops, belie their ultraviolent temperaments. In the pages of her manga, the twin cats travel contemporary urban landscapes witnessing and enacting all sorts of cruelties. Like Yamada, Nekojiru's works appeared in the underground magazine *Garo* in the early 1990s but only gained popularity after her husband Yamano Hajime took over the illustrations. After her suicide, Yamano would take on her penname and as the sole executor of her literary estate control the posthumous distribution of her works.[23]

At first, Nekojiru's suicide was figured as a copycat of sorts. In the press and among her fanbase, speculation arose that she had imitated the heavy metal rocker named "hide" (in lowercase and pronounced "he-day") of X Japan, who had died by the same method of hanging from a doorknob just eight days earlier on May 2, 1998.[24] At the time, the media identified hide's suicide and his anguish-filled music as one major cause of the huge spike in youth suicides, especially among his predominantly young female fanbase.[25] Within a week of his suicide, five teenage fans had attempted suicide, and three of them died while playing his music and/or wearing X Japan merchandise. Even in the cases of these youths, the links were seemingly a bit more tenuous than the copycat label ascribed to them might suggest. One middle schooler was said to have watched an X Japan video the night before his suicide, and another had written in letters to friends both that she "longed for hide to return" but also explained that her suicide was "no suicide following him in death, but out of a desire to die" (*ato-ōi jisatsu de wa naku, shinitai kibun*).[26]

Notwithstanding the fact that Nekojiru's husband publicly disputed any connection to X Japan or to hide that might explain her suicide, another source linked it not only to hide's but also to the later June 2001 suicide of Aoyama Masa'aki, the subculture writer on drugs, *lolicon*, and music who had become a shut-in (*hikikomori*). The links here were again tenuous, based solely on the coincidence that hide had written promotional blurbs praising Nekojiru's works while Nekojiru had written manga for Aoyama's manga zines and some blurbs praising his books.[27] Again, chains of writing and reading are implicated in copycat suicides to link disparate individuals who shared little besides, in this case, all being born in the 1960s and part of underground subcultures.

A friend and colleague of Nekojiru's, the editor and subculture writer Yoshinaga Yoshiaki, would offer a tribute of sorts that claimed her as part of his own personal genealogy. After his wife died by suicide in 2003, he penned a book in which he treats the self-deaths of his wife, Aoyama Masa'aki, and Nekojiru as parallel events

that rendered him a suicide survivor. His focus is "less the reasons that caused these individuals to commit suicide than on those left behind," as he makes clear in the book's preface. This point is also abundantly clear in the book's grammatically awkward and conspicuously gendered title, *Jisatsu sarechatta boku* (The [male] I who was suicided upon, 2004).[28]

For her part, Nekojiru had refused to self-narrate the causes for her suicide, at least publicly. According to one source, she had left behind multiple suicide notes dated from previous attempts years before, but none were published after her death except for a single line where she rejected "completely any talk about her motives for dying."[29] Her evil twinned cats living in an evil world naturally fueled assumptions about her worldview that might have led her there, nonetheless. Posthumous publications released by her husband helped fuel these assumptions. In July 1998, he published her sketch diaries in a volume called *Jiru-jiru nikki*, a series of one-panel cat drawings with handwritten text explanations of the "bizarre things she encountered on a day-to-day basis" from 1994 until April 1998, the month before she died. Using her dream notebooks as fodder, he also continued drawing his own tamer version of these cat comics under the commemorative penname of "NekojiruY."[30]

We cannot, of course, know what any of these young women writers would think about these posthumously published works or the stated motivations behind them—to enable the women who wrote them to speak from beyond the grave, in a sense. Saeki Masako, however, offered a clue. In her diaries, she commented on a work published during her lifetime that claimed to capture her in prose. In her diary entry from a month before she died, she reproduces an article titled "Bakuzen to shita shōsō: Saeki Masako no baai" (A vague sense of restless irritation: The case of Saeki Masako) that had appeared in a special issue of a young women's journal under the title of "Seishun no kiki" (The youth crisis). The article describes her trials and tribulations as a young woman working in the immediate postwar to help her family make ends meet. After a thwarted love affair, she realizes that relying on a man is what causes her a "vague sense of anxiety and restless irritation" and that "a woman must stand firmly on her own as a woman, or there is no hope of being saved." Despite the many direct quotes from her interview with the journalist, after replicating them (and the article) in her diary, she nonetheless wonders, "Seeing my own feelings so plainly displayed made me wonder if I really felt this way. This might be the usual qualifying remark, but I felt that my true feelings were hidden behind those words. There is not a single soul who could penetrate my truth."[31]

Saeki's words of caution against assuming that the words left behind reveal her "truth" are useful reminders not to collapse representations with realities, even when it is a self-representation. The hazards of doing so multiply in cases where there are no single final self-designated texts to speak for the dead or, conversely, when there are so very many to choose from.

With this caution in mind, I turn now to the manga artist Yamada Hanako. Her example offers a segue from this section's focus on *isho* and other more factual-based "writings left behind" to the more fictional multimedia texts discussed in part 3. In her case, they range from her diary entries and manga panels that declare the births and deaths of her many successive artistic identities. As we will see, her dizzying series of pseudonyms and characters' suicides and rebirths appear in textual and visual forms that would come to uncomfortably replicate Yamada's own.

A DIARY JUST BEFORE SUICIDE

In Yamada's case, although there was no single designated last note, again there was a text handwritten "just before" suicide that was reproduced and published in its aftermath to explain it and to speak in its writer's stead. *Jisatsu chokuzen nikki* is a sprawling work, even in her father's heavily edited version. Although he neatly divvies up her diary entries chronologically into subsections by theme—personal relationships (family, friends, and lovers), bullying, work pressures with manga editors and publishers, her thoughts about living and dying, her psychiatric diagnoses and treatments—what suffuses its pages is a painful entangled mess of feelings of hatred and despair for herself and others.[32]

For her father, it was crucial to displace the sole narrative that had come to stand as the shorthand by which her suicide was most widely known and explained—bullying (*ijime*), a hot topic in the media at the time amid an alarming rise in youth suicides. "I got upset and fed up with the way the media was reporting her exclusively as a 'manga artist who committed suicide as a victim of bullying.' More than anything else, I wanted to capture the artist Yamada Hanako, who eventually took her own life in deep despair after wearing down her body, continuing to write manga while coldly and calmly regarding her own internal sense of the ugly, dirty, and disgusting nature of human beings."[33]

Although her father's edited version downplays the theme of bullying, it is omnipresent in her works. Her manga typically feature school children bullied by their classmates and at the hands of unrelentingly evil female teachers who were often depicted with a menacing rising sun flag pattern behind them (fig. 25).[34]

In her diary entry for February 26, 1992, Yamada writes, "Bullied kids are flowers. I would become a flower for the sake of everyone. … I am a flower. If it were for everyone's sake, I'd be fine being smashed to pieces."[35] Incorporating these words from her diary, Yamada created one of her last manga on March 3, 1992, the day before her three-month institutionalization at a psychiatric hospital. "Tamashii no asoko" (The other realm of the spirit) is atypical of her usual style with a single large format manga panel with its pensive big-eyed attractive female character and neat, legible calligraphic style. Thematically, however, it is on point. This manga, too, figures bullying as its central theme and this character is figured as a martyr for bullied children everywhere.[36]

FIGURE 25. Bullied protagonists in Yamada's "Yotsuba no kurōbā" (1992) and "Wasuremono" (August 1988–June 1990). Yamada Hanako, *Karappo no sekai* (Tokyo: Seirin Kōgeisha, 1988), 30, 8.

As her father noted, bullying was far from the only motive for suicide identified in her writings. In a list of reasons for dying, it appears as just one of the seven numbered "Reasons [I] want to be summoned"(*Meisaretai riyū*) on May 22, just two days before she died:

1. at a certain age will be the family housemaid. Disreputable, dependent, good for nothin'.
2. an inability to make a single friend (because too gloomy).
3. future prospects dim. Won't find a place to work (will be bullied).
4. can no longer write manga = no reason to live [*ikigai ga nai*].
5. my family will make me eat meals. Don't wanna get fat.
6. no desire to do anything. Everything and anything is exhausting (helpless, listless).
7. 'anxiety disorder' attacks are painful.[37]

In the diary, bullying more often figures as an impediment to her creativity because it is featured too repetitively in her artistic works. In an entry from May 1991, Yamada recounts her publisher's berating her for submitting "yet another work in the same pattern as all the previous ones. And really, enough already with the bullied kid topic." She, too, berates herself for being a one-trick pony. In her father's edited version, this entry is juxtaposed with her drawing that depicts a beleaguered manga artist tagged as "me, three years after debuting," harangued by her editor in a toxic work environment. At the top is a note that "all manga artists put up with this painful experience in the beginning in the hopes they will eventually succeed (but that is not necessarily the case)."[38]

As with this example, her "diary" edited by her father intersperses her manga—often undated, untitled—with her dated diary entries that are arranged chronologically but also divided into multiple thematized sections. This makes it especially difficult to reconstruct any semblance of a coherent picture of the manga artist Yamada Hanako from this account, although the pains of the young woman Takaichi Yumi (her birthname) and of her father attempting to make sense of her life and her self-willed death come to the fore. In the hopes of doing so, I suggest we turn to her manga themselves to look at moments in which she figured her own self-death—and sometimes also her rebirth—in art.

YAMADA HANAKO, A.K.A. TAKAICHI YUMI, URAMOCHI KAMOME, YAMADA YŪKO, SUZUKI HARUYO

Before turning to her art, let us consider one last excerpt in her diary in which Yamada declares herself dead in a move that bears an uncanny resemblance to the strategies employed by Etō Jun, even if it employs a different register. Both writers decimate one artistic identity while declaring another. As we saw above, in his terse suicide note from July 1999 that he also signed using his penname "Etō Jun," he wrote:

> Etō Jun … is no more than a shell and this is why I resolved on my own to put an end to this shell [*keigai*, 形骸].

In a late March 1992 diary entry, Yamada invokes a similar metaphor of herself as an emptied out shell, also speaking of herself using a third person penname: "Yamada Hanako is an empty cicada shell [*semi no nukegara*, 蝉の抜け殻]. Will reappear as poet Suzuki Haruyo. (Suzuki Haruyo. Born in Niigata. April 12, 1971, 20 years old, B blood type. Address, Nakano East. … Sugiyama-villa Room D. No telephone. A very chatty and cheery girl. Catchphrase 'Oft-called a wandering Techno-boy!' Why? Just cuz')."[39] Here she declares the death of the manga artist Yamada Hanako but promises a rebirth of a new artist, the poet Suzuki Haruyo.

By this point in her career, Yamada had already cast off two prior pennames:

Uramochi Kamome (裏町かもめ), January 1979 at age twelve (debuts in
　　Nakayoshi Deluxe)

Yamada Yūko (山田ゆう子), February 1984, at age seventeen

Yamada Hanako (山田花子), 1987, at age twenty (breakthrough success
　　after praise from famed manga artist Nemoto Takashi; starts serializing in
　　Young Magazine, Garo, Reed Comics)

Suzuki Haruyo (鈴木ハルヨ), March 1992 (two months before her suicide)

As many noted, her choices for pennames (excluding her first, which loosely translates into Down-'n'-out Duck) were eclectic in that they were utterly ordinary. Why, as one manga artist asked, did she "play with a name that is more common than her real one?" It defied the "usual reason folks with common names like Suzuki … or Yamada used a penname."[40]

Only one of her works was published posthumously under her final new penname of Suzuki: "Aamen, Sōmen, Hiyashi sōmen." The title plays on the Japanese phrase "*Ah-sō*" and the word for a type of noodles (*sōmen*) often served cold (*hiyashi*), but here is invoked as the prelude to a prayer of sorts. Like "Tamashii no asoko," its style, with its atypical use of large, neat calligraphy, departs radically from the vast majority of Yamada's previous works. Moreover, this one exclusively uses text with no images at all and contains an unusually cheery poetic message:

> The small brook in spring burbles on by
> Whispering to the perfectly formed and beautifully colored violets
> 　　and lotus flowers on the banks
> Bloom! Bloom!
> The small brook in spring burbles on by
> Whispering to the groups of shrimp and killifish and kelp
> Swim the whole day away in the sun,
> Play, Play![41]

This one was penned on March 30, 1992, while she was in the hospital, whose recuperative interventions she referred to in her diaries with derision: "'The Land of Rest' [*yasumi no kuni*], naps and strolls. In this 'Land of Rest,' no freedom and no privacy & unable to go at my pace. Yamada Hanako is an empty cicada shell."[42]

If Yamada here figures one kind of possible escape in the beautiful, natural world, elsewhere she suggests only suicide offers that escape. In a story written in 1987 with the deceptive title of "Ikite itemo daijyōbu" (It'll be okay even if I live), Yamada depicts her typical protagonist—a victim of bullying. This story chronicles the travails of an "ugly, unpopular, and unhappy" middle school girl, ironically named Sachiko (幸子), or "child of happiness." In self-reflexive artistic prose that rivals Akutagawa's description of the merits of his method of choice for suicide in his final note, Yamada depicts a character debating the possible methods for

suicide as a menu of choices that stretch out before her almost lovingly. Scorned and bullied by her classmates and her love interest,

> Sachiko eventually hits upon the idea of suicide. Sounds of applause (*pachi pachi pachi*). But the problem was how to commit suicide. For the narcissist Sachiko, dying beautifully using something like sleeping pills was truly the way she wanted to die, but she didn't know how to get her hands on the pills. Jumping in front of a train or jumping off a building would mean limbs scattered everywhere, guts spilling out, and brain matter SPLAT! Although that kind of thing wouldn't matter once dead, for a young girl in her teens, it was an unbearable disgrace. Suicide by gas would cause problems for her family if there were an explosion; death by drowning and becoming a bloated corpse that floats to the surface and looks like [the eighteenth-century sumo wrestler] Dozaemon was just gross; and slitting her wrists would hurt. All these excuses, but in the end, she was really just afraid of dying.[43]

While this story concludes before any denouement that would make clear what the young protagonist chooses in the end, in another work, she finishes off her character with a gruesome self-death that is nonetheless depicted as a happy end of sorts.

In the ninth installation of "Maria no kōmon" (Maria's anus, August 1990), Yamada eerily anticipated her own suicidal leap from an eleventh story rooftop just two years later. She intersperses many clues about the work's autobiographical ties. She depicts a character named Tamami, a name she also used for her "good girl" alter ego in her diary.[44] In this panel (fig. 26), which includes Yamada's publishers' signs (Reed and Seirindō) in the right foreground, the girl leaps from a building with a joyous *PYON!*, the onomatopoeic expression for leaping that appears in a prominent thought bubble in flowery and girlish lettering with an elongated curlicue.

In this panel, we get not just the character's suicidal impulse but also, importantly, its imagined reception. In another echo of Akutagawa and also *The Complete Manual of Suicide* in which this manga panel is featured as a laudable example under the method of "leaping" (*tobikomi*), reception is paramount. In fact, it appears in three iterations; the uppermost right box that floats up from the foot of the leaping protagonist narrates the suicide in an omniscient voice using past tense, "But, just this one time in the very end, [she] broke the 'rules' and did what she wanted to in her heart." The thought bubble floating from her head anticipates the act in the first person: "I know that suicide is bad, but I just don't want to live anymore!" And in the lower left, an inset panel of her bloodied face and the whispering *zawa zawas* of bystanders who cry out, "Look! (*Miro yo!*) There's a satisfied smile on her face."[45]

With this uncanny prefiguration of her own suicide here, Yamada responds to the exorbitant call to write one's own death. Hers, too, mightily strategizes with language and image to produce multiple temporalities and multiple selves looking at other selves dying and dead.

Yet unlike Etō Jun, who depicted a writing self who could be both inside and outside texts of his own making, Yamada, the authoress, makes no appearance outside of this circle. Instead, she appears forever entrapped therein by characters
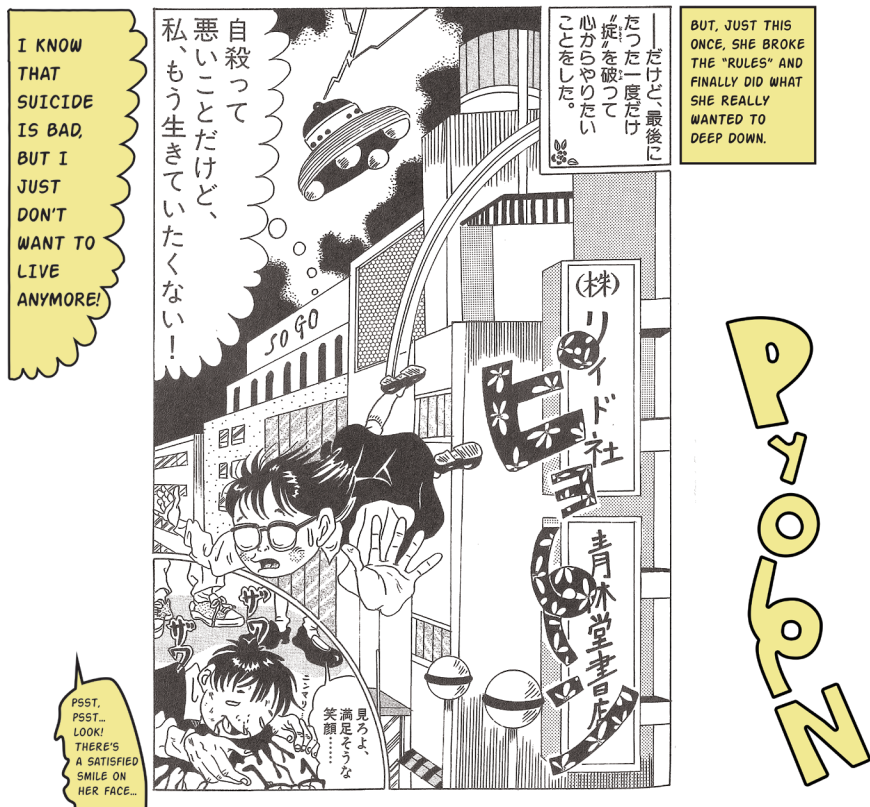
FIGURE 26. Tamami's leap in "Maria's anus" (Maria no kōmon), *Der Bleu Angel* (August 1990). Yamada Hanako, *Nageki no tenshi* (Tokyo: Seirin Kōgeisha, 1999). (My translations added here in margins.)

of her own making. It is this characterization of her and her art that dominated after her suicide. In a June 1996 article in *Garo*, her father unfavorably contrasted her manga with those of Nemoto Takashi, her patron who had helped launch her debut as a professional manga artist, writing that "Whereas Nemoto made others the object of his observations, for Yamada Hanako, the object of observation was always herself."[46] If Nemoto escaped any trap of self-representation, Yamada had inadvertently entrapped herself.

In an afterword to early editions of her diary, her father explains that it was only after her death when talking with a psychiatrist who had treated her when she was institutionalized that he came to understand the severity and intractability of the issue for Yamada. He summarizes the doctor's diagnosis as follows:

> Usually a writer does not make a character appear in their works that coldly exposes portions of themselves. Instead, writers preserve that part in their interior [*naimen*].

But in Yamada's case, exposing parts of herself coldly in this way made it difficult for her to maintain her mental balance. In other words, the problem is embodying [*gushōka*, 具象化] these parts of oneself in one's works. … When it reaches this point, there are no effective medical treatments. Medicine only exacerbates the illness. To keep it in check, the only possible solution is to not turn one's attention to the self, to not write oneself [*jibun jishin no koto o kakasenai*]. But then this would mean killing off her genius as an artist. For me, as someone who is both a psychiatrist and someone who loves art, this poses a dilemma. … In Yamada Hanako's case where she is an artist who writes herself into her works just as she is [*sono mama*], it usually in the end results in mental illness [*kokoro no byō*]. This is sadly often the truth of the matter.[47]

Intriguingly, in updated print runs of Yamada's diary, none of this medical diagnosis appears. It seems to have been censored, whether out of fears of libel or liability.

I quote this summary of this doctor's diagnosis at length here since it encapsulates a common and fairly commonsensical presumption about the relationship between writing and suicide. Self-writing is linked to suicide when writing a self-negating view of the self. This is one that as we have already seen was lodged in the case of Akutagawa whose late semi-autobiographical turn in his works were blamed for his "defeat" at the hands of literature, and as we will see below, one that is frequently invoked to explain Mishima's suicide and his many suicidal characters.

For her part, Yamada claimed that what bothered her were not any negative self-depictions but prettified versions that could not help but be mere self-justifying exercises. In a diary entry from July 1991, Yamada lamented that her manga "inevitably (if subconsciously) turn into just that kind of self-justifying move, no matter how much I might try to write disposing of myself. (*Donna ni jibun o sutete kaitemo, dokka de [muishiki ni] jiko seitōka shite shimau*)." But, as she put it, the equation that linked her "protagonists = pitiable humans = author" was unavoidable because "it is impossible to draw manga utterly lacking in self-assertion (since drawing manga itself is self-assertion)."[48]

With this tautological equation, the author is bound to tragic characters inside and outside the text. What, if anything, might remove authors from this binding equation?

A creative solution is proffered by manga artist Nemoto Takashi in his own memorial work "offered in praise of the late Yamada Hanako" (*Kojin・Yamada Hanako sanshi e sasageru*). He titles it "The woman who saw Maria's anus," in a reference to Yamada's most popular manga, "Maria's anus," and offers a rewrite of Yamada's own most visceral anticipation of her suicidal leap in her manga (see fig. 26).[49] Nemoto's manga creatively suggests the ways that seeing oneself in one's own manga might just offer the artist one way out.

Like many of Yamada's own protagonists, Nemoto's Sayuri fails to articulate her true feelings in her spoken dialogue, although thought bubbles are filled with her unvarnished vitriol. In this short, three-page sketch, "Sayuri (a plain, introverted girl)" is reluctantly dating the pushy and unattractive "Masa, who has no clue that he is totally hated," but she cannot bring herself to break it off even after

FIGURE 27. Yamada Hanako, seeing herself reflected in manga of her own and other's making. Nemoto Takashi, "Maria no kōmon o mita onna," *Garo Kinkyū tokushū: Tsuitō Yamada Hanako* (August 1992). Courtesy Nemoto Takashi.

he insists upon buying her a tight *body-con* dress much to her public humiliation. In despair after this incident, she finds a comic book by Yamada Hanako titled *Nageki tenshi* (*Der Bleu Engel*) and sees herself in the many panels of the overeager, bullied schoolgirl "Tamami" (fig. 27). Declaring "Th-this is about me!," she decides to commit suicide following the despairing advice in one panel that promises it's better "to die in a blaze rather than stupidly live on." Before she can do so, however, news comes that her unattractive suitor Masa has suddenly died, and she feels cornered into adopting the pose of a bereft mournful girlfriend.

Two years later, she dies having leaped from the roof of a tall building, her angel figure ascending to heaven and declaring "Ahh, finally! I could die" (fig. 27). In an "elementary class for the dead" in heaven, she gets seated next to "Yamada," a clear analogue for the manga artist Yamada Hanako with her signature pigtails and beret. Here, "Yamada" reveals Sayuri's hidden motivations for waiting the two years. She claims to know the real reason that Sayuri waited two years to die, even if the gods do not: "It was only because you were afraid everyone would think you followed him in death." In Nemoto's final panel, Yamada sketches manga while observing those around her even up in heaven (fig. 28).

We might recall here that Yamada, too, could be said to have waited for a two-year period of delay that mirrors Sayuri's. The manga panel depicting Tamami's
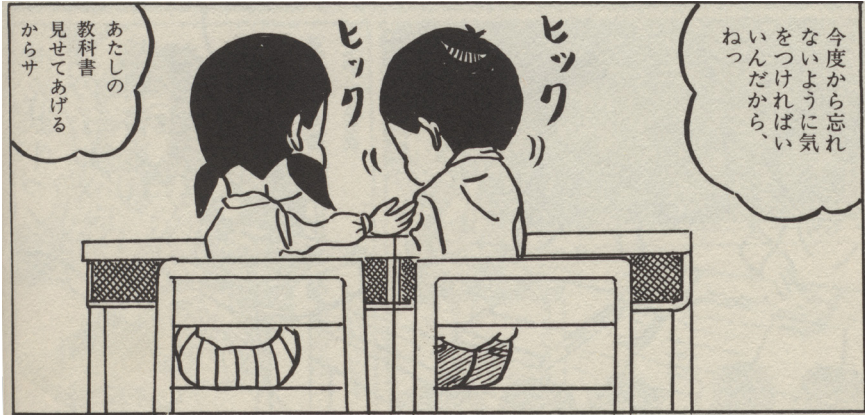
FIGURE 28. Meeting Yamada Hanako in heaven and in memorial manga by Nemoto Takashi. Nemoto Takashi, "Maria no kōmon o mita onna," *Garo Kinkyū tokushū: Tsuitō Yamada Hanako* (August 1992). Courtesy Nemoto Takashi.

FIGURE 29. "Four-leaf clover" ("Yotsuba no kurōbā"), written sometime in May 1992. Yamada Hanako, *Karappo no seka* (Tokyo: Seirin Kōgeisha, 1998), 30.

leap from her publishers' building rooftop originally appeared in August 1990, two years before Yamada's own suicidal leap in May 1992.

I cite this manga tribute because it seems to offer an escape for the artist Yamada Hanako and for those trying to understand and mourn her entangled acts of writing and dying in retrospect. Far from offering any clear explanation or claiming simple cause and effect here, Nemoto's rendition suggests the complicated entanglements between acts of writing and reading, as well as among manga artists, characters, texts, and readers. The titular "woman who saw Maria's anus," after all, is simultaneously the character *in* and the reader *of* that very manga. Even if the manga artist "Yamada" has insight into the character-reader, she is not entirely collapsed with them. Instead, she appears distinctly as the authoress Yamada Hanako who, like an omniscient god in heaven, keenly observes and depicts these entangled acts of reading and dying. Ever the artist, she sketches and lives on.

In what is said to be her last manga, "Four-leaf clover" (fig. 29), Yamada returns to her perennial theme of the bullied child and to using her penname Yamada Hanako despite having declared her dead and shed two months earlier. Here, there is at last a reprieve for her protagonist, in this case a young boy who is subjected to the usual merciless bullying by his pig-faced teacher. But this time, it ends with him back home happily listening to his favorite band's new album late into the night after being comforted by a kind classmate at school.

At last, the character lives on too, like the artist Yamada Hanako in manga of her own and others' making.