# Epilogue

## *Dialoguing with the Dead*

*A book is a great cemetery where the names have been effaced from most of the tombs and are no longer legible. Yet there are times when one remembers a name perfectly well, but without knowing whether anything of the person who bore it survives within these pages.*

—MARCEL PROUST, *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*, 1927

*"Repository," he finally says, "you know this word? A resting place. A text—a book—is a resting place for the memories of people who have lived before. A way for the memory to stay fixed after the soul has traveled on."*

—LICINIUS IN *CLOUD CUCKOO LAND* (DOERR 2021)

In "Fuyu no tabi: Shisha to no taiwa" (Winter's journey: A conversation with the dead), a hauntingly beautiful essay penned one year after Mishima's suicide, the writer Enchi Fumiko imagines the appearance of Mishima's ghost one winter's night in her library. As they debate their shared love of classical literature and kabuki theater, Enchi strives to reconcile Mishima's artistic talents and tastes with his suicidal act. When she criticizes his suicide—claiming that "the moment you cut off life in the manliest fashion was when your feminine maiden side rose in revolt"—he retorts, "Ah, it would've really been something if you could've said that to me when I was alive. … But now, since I've already had my fill of tasting that bitter phrase 'the dead have no mouths,' let's just read on."[1]

It is no coincidence that Enchi opens by setting this piece in her library, beginning with the line, "I was looking for something" (*Watashi wa sagashimono o shite ita*) and explaining that "Books are heavy things" (*Hon to iu mono wa omoi mono de aru*). She imagines her elderly woman's body crushed and immobilized by piles of dusty books and paper scraps, living, as she does, among the leaves of books, "dwelling like a silverfish" (*shimi no sumika*). Although younger by a generation,

Mishima, too, she notes, is "a ghost born from the dwellings of silverfish."[2] In other words, they are a pair of bookworms who commune in death, just as they did in life, over books.

Haunted by the images of Mishima's severed head that appear in the tabloids, Enchi imagines another kind of haunting here, in and through the pages of her and his beloved books. The book Enchi initially seeks and the one that Mishima's ghost locates for her is a red-covered translation of D'Annunzio's 1911 play "Le Martyre de saint Sébastian." Although it goes unmentioned here, this volume is likely one co-translated by Mishima himself.[3]

In the essay's final lines, it is not Mishima, but only this book that remains:

> When I finished reading over the essay manuscript, the room was dark. My listener was no longer there, and only the book on Saint Sebastian remained on top of the desk, like a red square of blood.
>
> Genkō o yomiowatta toki, heya no naka wa kuraku natte ita. Kikite wa sude ni soko ni inai de, San Sebasuchien no seihōkei no chi no yō ni akai hon dake ga tsukue no ue ni okarete ita.[4]

What is Enchi to do with these remains in the end? What, for that matter, is a reader to do in the end with all the textual remains offered in this book?

These are troublesome bodies of texts. "Like red squares of blood," each bears the bodily traces of those who wrote and read them when faced with suicide—Fujimura's 143-character poem of "tears or blood," the "unsightly" writings and corpse of young poet Kishigami or Akutagawa's own revealing and concealing corpus, the anonymous young woman's skeleton discovered in Aokigahara forest with a book as her pillow, the poetic "smoke rising from Mount Mihara" for the young poet Matsumoto's memorial tablet, Dazai's "tunnel of green," the single writing brush of Etō Jun's buried in a literary grave in lieu of his corpse, Mishima's gory seppuku and a prettified afterlife on the page and on-screen, Yamada Hanako's flowery "PYON!" in a manga panel.

Perhaps no text more poignantly demonstrates the entangled nature of these writing, reading, and dying bodies than the note of the young, exhausted marathoner Kōkichi marked by a drop of his blood and its edges stained with tears that fell from his elder brother's eyes upon reading it.

Faced with these troubling bodies of texts, one option is for us to read and to write in response, like many others before us. To converse with the recently deceased in prose like Enchi. To offer a memorial writing in lieu of a single stick of incense at Etō Jun's funeral, as Yoshimoto Taka'aki did, or to imagine cradling the bones of the dead while conjuring him from her own sickbed as Ōba Minako did. To write of another who died calling out one's very own name and to call out to them as well in one's poetry, like the young poet Nagasawa Nobuko did for Haraguchi Tōzō. To try to make orderly the disorderly volumes of notebooks and

diaries left behind by his manga artist daughter as Yamada Hanako's father did. Or, in the absence of any text, to read and map out the scene of a suicide in an effort to situate oneself in the same neatly mapped space as Kon Wajirō did.

The inevitable series of substitutions whereby survivors represent the dead is evident in all these posthumous publications where friends, family, and strangers, like me, take up the brush in response. At the point when the dead can no longer speak for themselves, others speak about, to, and for them. What can help mitigate our fears of committing any kind of "posthumous infidelity," or at least an "obscene … violation," is by reading and writing with care, as they themselves did. It is helpful to remember that in writing, they were both creating and severing connections across the centuries. Our own acts of writing and reading attempt to stretch across this divide to bring us closer to those who have died before us and also to face the death that lies ahead for all of us.

Each of these writings demonstrates what Anne Carson identifies as the "pulling and calling" motions of an epitaph, drawing us toward those who have died just as we draw them toward us. Like the carved epitaphs "upon a tomb" (*epi* + *taphos*), these inscriptions mark both a person's passing from our world and their preservation in it. The dead, Carson notes, are not "saved by this motion. Except as writing. But that is not nothing."[5] We, too, can be saved by this doubled motion for it is in and through these long-dead words and images that these reunions with the dead are imagined, experienced, and possible. And that is not nothing.