Mount Mihara's Same-Sex Suicides and Flippant Flips

In many respects, the 1930s suicide boom at Mount Mihara offered a repeat of Kegon. After the suicidal leap of an elite university student into the fiery volcano crater in May 1933, scores of imitators followed, and the site quickly became Japan's newest *jisatsu meisho*. Many of the same elements were present that had ensured the canonization of Fujimura's leap at Kegon: a highly educated, poetry-composing youth from Tokyo had traveled to die at a distant site of great natural beauty. The island volcano offered the similar promise of disappearing one's corpse. And again, what remained in its stead were poems and poetic visions that situated the dead forever at that idyllic site.

Mount Mihara was no Kegon Falls, however, and the poetics were rapidly left behind.

As time went on, the incident failed to conform to this precedent. It was revealed that one of the young women survived, having purchased a two-way ticket and having led another young woman to her death there a month earlier. After being tagged a "same-sex love suicide" (*dōsei shinjū*) with a "death guide" (*michizure shinjū*), media coverage abruptly shifted. Aestheticized visions of the act from a distance gave way to pathologizing diagnoses of evil temptresses who lured virgins to their early death in the bowels of the volcano.

The site soon became associated with a frivolous exhibitionism that compared unfavorably with the more philosophical suicides at Kegon. As one critic complained in April 1933, Mihara suicides "lack the purity of feeling or logic of leapers at Kegon Falls. The cause of suicide in each and every case lacks any specific reason. Instead they are decadently *playing with death*."[1] Unlike the more cultured and spiritual Kegon Religion that afflicted followers of Fujimura, these suffered from Mount Mihara disease (*Miharayama byō*).

The media coverage followed a predictable pattern that is ripe for a critique of its gendered and heterosexist biases. In the wake of this woman's suicide and the revelations about her surviving companion, the two women, and girls' culture more broadly, were subjected to a spate of sensationalist and moralistic discourses in the media ranging from articles with titles like "Dōseiai o sabaku" (In judgment of same-sex love") to "Shojo no shi o kataru zadankai" (A symposium on the death of young girls) sponsored by the women's journal *Fujin sekai* for the national conference of girls' high school principals.[2] This time, the debates would be infused with recent scientific discourses on suicidology, sexology, and even geology. Scientists joined forces with journalists intent on preventing suicide at Mount Mihara to plumb the volcano's depths in an attempt to expose and thereby undermine its sirenic powers.

In what follows, I stress the importance of tracing the aestheticized narratives of this incident as much as these pathologizing ones that came to dominate. The latter are much easier to locate in the surviving traces, if at times they are all too predictable. In an era known for *ero-guro-nansensu*, short for "erotic-grotesque-nonsense," lowbrow materials—often salacious and sordid journalistic and pop culture works—abound. To offer a few representative examples, a short story by popular writer Yoshida Genjirō titled "Yōgan no michi" (Path of lava) was serialized in *Fujin kōron* two months after the incident and included the disingenuous disclaimer that it "was most certainly not a mere titillating novel"; tales of reporters who traveled to Ōshima encountering the ghosts of young girls appeared in a serialized collection titled "Shima musume wa nageku" (Grieving island girls) in *Niroku shinbun* in August 1933; and Gosho Heinosuke directed a film that year called *Shojo yo, sayonara* (Young virgin, sayonara).[3]

The Mihara incident may have lacked a Sōseki writing on its behalf, but for the young woman whose suicide was said to have started it all, the poetics of the site were crucial to making it a desirable place to die. Finding the poetic traces she left behind proves to be its own exercise in recovery, for they quickly got buried in the *ero-guro* noise. But as I hope to show, her self-representations too did not appear in a vacuum but instead tapped into preexisting narratives that offered distant views of besotted virginal girls worshipping at the volcano's "sacred fire." These had been cultivated by island developers in the interest of boosting tourism and propagated in poetry and in pop culture.

The enduring success of all these tie-ups led author Sakaguchi Ango in 1950 to sarcastically note that the young women's suicides offered their own commodity that could be packaged for mass consumption and profit decades later: "The several glorious pioneering schoolgirls are worshipped like gods as the progenitors of suicide at Mount Mihara. Not so much by the masses of suicides who follow in their wake, but for the local islanders. Huge memorial stones standing before countless tea shops declare themselves a resting place for these founders [*shiso*, 始祖]."[4]

These founding mothers were said to have ushered in a new "suicide age" (*jisatsu jidai*) for the 1930s. Ironically, even these declarations of an entirely "new" mode of suicide that was utterly unlike its predecessors suggested repetition as much as difference. As the lines of the popular 1934 song "Onna gokoro" (Woman's heart) put it, Mihara was considered the new Kegon, especially for the fairer sex: "When you're young, the alternative to Kegon is Mihara."[5]

These were the newest members of the circle led by "Fujimura, the forefather." And again, the story could be controlled only so much by its founders after their deaths. I turn now to trace the rapidly shifting contours of this incident and its legacy. At the same time that it would spur antecedents that strayed far from their lofty predecessor, it engendered suicide prevention strategies that tapped into age-old methods dating back centuries while proving perfectly suited to the contemporary *ero-guro* climate.

ŌSHIMA, THE ISLAND OF POETRY AND DEATH

Ōshima's reputation as an "island of poetry" preceded its notoriety as an "island of death" (*shi no shima*), and yet these two aspects were entangled from the start. This image was somewhat inadvertently cultivated by island developers intent on attracting tourists to this closest and largest of eight islands set off the coast of scenic Izu peninsula about seventy-five miles from Tokyo. The island's central attraction is Mount Mihara, an active volcano whose 2,500-foot-high peak offers spectacular panoramic views.

In the late 1920s, Ōshima was first developed, in the words of one developer, as a respite from "the health problems, philosophical conundrums and other various problems afflicting city dwellers these days."[6] This required basic infrastructure like roads and electricity, but alongside such necessities were concerted efforts to cultivate an aura of mystery around the island, especially its virginal girls and sacred volcano. In 1928, ferry service started, as did business at the Sacred Fire Teahouse (Goshinbi chaya); the same year phones were installed saw the arrival of two camels and eleven donkeys to carry tourists across the sands. Photos of the famous *shinpa* theater and film actress Mizutani Yaeko riding a camel silhouetted against the volcano and setting sun sold in huge numbers, as did ones of the emperor at the peak during his visit in May 1929.

Cultural productions helped construct a romanticized vision of the island. In 1928, the steamship company Tōkai Kisen commissioned prominent writers, like journalist Tokutomi Sohō, who published a travel account, I-novelists Tokuda Shūsei and Chikamatsu Shūkō, as well as painters and manga artists. That same year, singers Satō Chiyako and Fujiwara Yoshie performed the hit song "Habu no minato" (The port of Habu). Written back in 1923 by a songwriter who had never visited the island, the lyrics were filled with inaccuracies, such as claims that one can see the sun setting over the water from this southeastern port city and images

of "island maidens living amid the sacred fire" who tearfully bid farewell to lovers at the harbor. Like any *meisho*, poeticizing the site was not necessarily based on any tangible reality, or even on actually having visited it, but instead on a conjured vision of it from afar.

Even works not explicitly set in Ōshima were appropriated retroactively to shore up this image of the island as a romantic site of love and loss. For example, Kawabata Yasunari's 1926 story "Izu no odoriko" ("The Izu Dancer") and its many film adaptations (including the 1933 one also directed by Gosho Heinosuke, who as we will see had something of a reputation for making films about contemporary suicide incidents) are listed in the official timeline for the island's history. Fujimori Seikichi's 1914 debut novel set in Ōshima, was initially titled *Nami* (Waves) but later retitled *Wakaki hi no nayami* (The anguish of youth) in line with contemporary discourses about suicidal youths. Another song, the 1932 hit "Shima no musume" (Island girl), does not specify any island name, but in August 1936, Ōshima officials installed a stone inscribed with lyrics describing a sixteen-year-old girl's lost love, a sailor who perished in a storm, sinking to the bottom of the sea with "the waves as his pillow night after night" (*yogoto yogoto no nami makura*).[7]

The volcano offered the island's central attraction, and it, too, could evoke undying love or, alternatively, dying for love. In promotional articles placed in *Yomiuri shinbun* in January 1932, which offered three thousand lucky readers free trips, photos of camels silhouetted against the peak were accompanied by folk tales and songs celebrating sacrifices to the "sacred fire" (*goshinbi*).[8] In poetry, hot fiery volcanic smoke had long conjured associations with enduring, yet burning love, and therefore with love suicides as well.

> Love burns / like a fire / Its flame never-ending.
>
> *Hi no gotoku / koi wa moete / hono'o no taeyaranu.*[9]

Other volcanoes that became suicide hotspots in the mid-1930s, like Mount Aso and Mount Asama, helped fuel this connection. The eternally burning sacred fire (*moyuru goshinbi*) of Mount Mihara was celebrated as a site where love was lost but also eternal. A hit song of this title ("Moyuru goshinbi") from June 1933 celebrated both in its refrain:

> Longing for love, Mount Mihara / The mountain smoke / forever and ever.
>
> *Koi shi natsukashi Miharayama / yama no kemuri yo / itsumademo.*[10]

This song was the tie-in for the Gosho Heinosuke film about Mount Mihara released that same month—*Shojo yo, sayonara*. The film itself is not extant, although its song lyrics suggest how it tapped into the same images of black-haired island virgins, tearful partings, lost loves, donkey rides, and desert moons that had been propagated by the island developers.

The success of these measures designed to draw in tourists was phenomenal; Ōshima went from around fifty thousand visitors in 1929 to over eighty thousand in 1931 and reached nearly two hundred thousand by 1933.[11] The numbers of suicides in the volcano also peaked during this period; the first reported one occurred in January 1928, while in 1933 alone, 129 people died there and over six hundred attempted. The boom was attributed to one suicide that was particularly sensationalized by the press, one that invited publicity because it was thought to involve same-sex love and foul play among young women.

SAME-SEX SUICIDE AND LITERATURE-LOVING LESBIANS AT MOUNT MIHARA

On February 12, 1933, two second-year university students from Tokyo Jissen Girls' school—Matsumoto Kiyoko (aged twenty-one) and Tomita Masako—ascended Mount Mihara, but only Tomita returned. According to the initial report that appeared two days later in *Tokyo Asahi shinbun*, they had planned a "same-sex love suicide" (*dōsei shinjū*), but one of them was saved by a guard from the nearby Sacred Fire Teahouse. The journalist imaginatively reconstructed their arrival on the island: "As soon as the schoolgirls disembarked from the ferry, the two beauties walked the path up to the billowing white smoke of Mount Mihara," choosing "this great site of natural beauty as their place to die." The next day's edition offered an eyewitness account of Kiyoko's spectacular leap in highly aestheticized terms: according to the teahouse guard, "she leapt wearing a purple silk crepe kimono with the morning sunlight shining in front of her. With her sleeves billowing and shining in the yellowed smoke, she looked exactly like a cicada flying off."

When the Asahi journalist Kinoshita Sōichi got the exclusive scoop in a telegram from the Ōshima news desk the next night, he recalled thinking, "A volcano, a female student, or rather two of them—Wow! [*korya sugoi!*]"[12]

As Gregory Pflugfelder explores in his article "Schoolgirl Intimacy and 'Same-Sex Love,'" journalistic representations of same-sex suicides in the early twentieth century "observed well-established formulae" dating back to Edo-period love suicides. These included attention to clothing and physical beauty as well as aestheticized descriptions of the *michiyuki*-like poetic journey to the death site. Also evident was a more modern inclination to assert a "discursive link between literary tendencies, 'same-sex love,' and death that had become well-entrenched by the 1930s."[13] Indeed, in this first Asahi article reporting on the 1933 incident, a splashy large-font and bolded sub-headline characterized Matsumoto as a "Talented student who graduated from a virtuous girls' high school and **LOVED LITERATURE IMMENSELY**." It noted her penchant for writing both Japanese *tanka* and also *kanshi* in the style of the famed Chinese poet Li Bai, whose penname

she had adopted. When interviewed for the article, her father was careful to point out that although she was an avid reader, he had "warned her against becoming addicted to books [*dokusho no chūdoku*]."[14]

Although the early media coverage honed closely to the established formula for double suicide narratives, the incident itself did not. The two had not jumped in one another's arms in the fashion of *dakiai shinjū* perishing together in the crater. One of the women had not died. Tomita Masako was reportedly restrained from following her friend by the guard installed beside the crater, but she had also, unlike Matsumoto Kiyoko, purchased a round-trip ferry ticket. More suspiciously, it was soon discovered that she had also guided another classmate to her death at Mount Mihara the previous month.

When this was revealed, the tone of the reports shifted abruptly from an image of conjugal bliss in an idyllic setting to one of a bizarre pathological "death guide" (*shide no annai*) who was luring young woman to their deaths in the fiery volcano. This gave rise to speculation about Masako's "abnormal neurology" (*ijō shinkei*) and her demonization as "the girl who invited death" (*shi o sasou musume*), as one headline put it. Even after this revelation, titillating speculation about the sexuality of these schoolgirls persisted. The "bizarre! two-time guide" was hyped in articles that appeared beside headlines that admitted in a confusing and disingenuous mix of font-sizes "**DŌSEIAI** nazo de nai" (**SAME-SEX LOVE** riddle, it is not).[15] The April 1933 *Fujin sekai* special issue titled "In Judgment of Same-Sex Love" drew parallels between female-female love and dying at Mount Mihara or "divorce" (a euphemism for suicide leaps) at Atami, and its advertisements warned that readers "would be astonished by the terrifying evils of same-sex love."[16] Alarmist articles touted the incident as a "warning bell to mothers of the world!" and asked, "The nature of modern female students: What makes these virgins throw their bodies into the volcano of Mount Mihara?"[17]

As this might suggest, the tendency to pathologize suicide was particularly pronounced in women's cases, and all the more so in the case of female-female love suicides. In her article "Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan," Jennifer Robertson contrasts the biased coverage of an attempted lesbian double suicide by an all-female revue actress and a beloved fan in 1935 with the media's unabashed celebration of the "pure love" of the young heterosexual couple in the Sakata incident three years earlier.[18]

Writing back in 1949, Yamana Shōtarō noted the divided gendered reception of suicidal leaps into the volcano, with men's coded as "extremely brave" compared to the "mysterious allure" of women's "sacred fire suicides."[19] The not-so-subtle gender politics at work were laid bare in a comment from publishing giant Kikuchi Kan: "In contemporary society, past morals have lost their authority. If even men are at a loss over what to do about this, it's only natural that women are all the more so."[20] Even when choosing self-death, women were depicted as lacking manly volition,

instead "seduced to suicide" (*jisatsu o izanatta*) bedeviled by their beautiful female companions or the mother of all volcanoes, "the beckoning sacred fire."[21]

As Francesca Di Marco's work demonstrates, psychiatric and popular discourses often converged in the early 1930s to pathologize suicide when it failed to conform to the desired heroic mode that could be aligned with national policies. While *shinjū*, Buddhist martyrs, and bushido-inspired seppuku were often exempt from such critiques as expressions of desirable cultural values in an era of increasing ethnocentric nationalism, the Mihara suicide was "a case of female psychological maladjustment and emotional instability."[22] Not only was Masako pathologized as an evil, sick temptress; so, too, was the volcano, whose victims were labeled "the patients [*kanja*] of Mount Mihara."[23]

But it is also important to remember that such pathologizing discourses coexisted beside aestheticizing ones and that these were not mutually exclusive. Author Yoshiya Nobuko divvied her assessment of the incident into two halves that could be neatly assigned to each tendency and, conveniently, to each woman. She asked:

> Does the psychology of the suicidal Kiyoko stem from a long-held deep fascination with death in these times of instability? Is it characteristic of young girls today whose stance toward life is to separate themselves from a reality that gets more and more real every day? Might we venture to say that this is a weak resolution? Masako's psychology, on the other hand, appears a bit abnormal [*chotto abunōmaru*] with some kind of personality disorder [*seikaku no hatansha*]. Kiyoko achieved such a "Man'yō aesthetic suicide" [*Man'yō tanbi jisatsu*] that she seems like an old-fashioned maiden, but a partner like Masako who caused the incident makes for an interesting point of comparison.[24]

In these comments that suggest familiarity with burgeoning psychoanalytical and sexological discourses, Yoshiya exhibited some sympathy for the aesthete Kiyoko while allowing Masako none. Although she is slightly critical of the escapism of young girls like Kiyoko, taking refuge in the lyricism of ancient poetic anthologies like the eighth-century *Man'yōshū* transforms the girl into an old-fashioned maiden (*kofū na musume*) from a long-ago tale.

Female suicide could be pathologized and aestheticized in the very same breath. As we will see in the next sections, Matsumoto's own last writings and final words straddle both these impulses while leaning heavily toward a prettified vision of death from afar. In her choice of locale and her final words that situate her forever there, Matsumoto, too, seems to have taken refuge in the reassuring distant image of the ever burning sacred fire.

SELF-WRITINGS AND SELF-DEATH AT MIHARA

Matsumoto left two suicide notes by the volcano mouth, one to a good friend (who later married her brother) and another to that friend's mother. Both were dated the day of her death. To the mother, she offered the closest thing to an explanation of her motives. She paints a picture of a person in extreme pain seeking release:

I will kill off the human being that I myself hate the most. I believe that is the absolute best that my other self can do.

Watashi no mottomo kiratte iru watakushi to iu ningen o koroshite shimaimasu, sore ga tahō no watakushi no saizen da to omowarete narimasen.[25]

With her splintered selves here, she anticipates the Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic theories that Karl Menninger famously advanced in his 1938 *Man against Himself*. He diagnosed suicidal individuals as embodying three drives: the wish to kill, the wish to be killed, and the wish to die.[26] Interpreted through this lens, Matsumoto's murderous impulse extends to the one self, who wants to die, while allowing for another self to emerge, or remain, in its stead.

It is hard to know what to make of this trace, which received little to no attention from the press after her suicide. It is filled with raw emotions and simultaneously devoid of emotion. Its detached clinical language defies any poetic reading; even if it points to a rebirth, it is far from the reassuring (and oft-quoted) image of a cicada taking off into the sunshine that had been offered by the teahouse guard. While it points to a deep-seated self-hatred that could reveal a motive of sorts, the source of that feeling remains unremarked. In the absence of a clearly stated motive, as with Fujimura's at Kegon, everything from the mundane to the sacred would be invoked in this death's aftermath.

The fact that Matsumoto had left this note behind for her friend's mother but was motherless herself led friends to speculate that this loss was the root cause, one compounded by the more recent death of her married elder sister the year before.[27] Other possible explanations included a desire to avoid marriage (and the implication of homosexuality), her unhealthy aestheticism and bookish addictions, an unlikeable grandmother, or, alternatively, her lonely life with only a brother and an elderly father to look after her. Such assertions could only remain at the level of speculation. Her traveling companion, Tomita, claimed that the only explanation that Matsumoto offered on the way up the mountain was that "the time for me to go to heaven has come."[28] It was impossible to know her motive given her own failure to articulate one or, perhaps more accurately, her pointed refusal to do so in any of her communications.

Matsumoto's other note to her good friend was signed with only a penname that evoked her somewhat self-effacing association with an "insignificant breeze in the temple halls of Murasaki [Shikibu]." The note itself contained only a famous poem by Ariwara no Narihira (825–80). Even this closest friend gets a privileged (though borrowed) communication in the form of a citation of another's poem:

As the famed lover Narihira too has already put it,

It will be best	omou koto
to keep silent	iwade zo tada ni
and not say what I think	yaminu beki
for there is no other	ware to hitoshiki
who shares my feelings.	hito shinakereba[29]

In effect, Matsumoto declares a self-willed silence two times over here. With the use of a penname, the death of its author has been effected even before the pen was taken to paper only to parrot the words of another long-dead author, who himself is said to have left this as a deathbed composition, his second to last.

At first glance, the two textual traces—the self-hating letter and the Narihira poem—that Matsumoto left behind at the volcano mouth seem to be polar opposites. The one echoes the clinical language of psychiatry, while the other draws from traditional poetics. Despite their different registers, both articulate an overwhelming desire for silence and self-erasure, even while marking this desire in writing. By offering textual remains that mark the writer's own prospective absence, they reveal competing impulses for self-destruction and self-preservation.

In these and other final communications, Matsumoto conspicuously avoided narrative explanations for her suicide, instead favoring a fragmented poetics. When setting off to Ōshima, her final parting words to her father, who begged she not do anything to worry her aging parent, were just as enigmatic as her two suicide notes; she said only, "Like a cloud" (*kumo no yō na mono desu*).[30] In the wake of her death, other similarly poetic fragments she left behind would endure, especially those that located her symbolically as an enduring if ephemeral presence in the natural world. If these traces do little to explain her motive, they reveal a great deal about her chosen symbolism. I turn now to consider the nature of these traces and to speculate on their function for both Matsumoto herself and the loved ones she left behind.

POETIC CORPUS AS SUBSTITUTE CORPSE: ETERNAL SMOKE AND IMMORTAL POETRY

After her first trip to Ōshima with a couple dozen friends back in late October 1932, Matsumoto was said to be entranced by the island and especially the billowing volcanic smoke (fig. 5). She composed this poem after her return from that first trip:

Burnt grasses and trees	*yakekusaki*
lined up along	*yōgan no*
the path of lava.	*michi tsuzukitari*
On Mount Mihara	*Mihara no yama ni*
smoke rises and rises.	*kemuri tachitatsu*[31]

In the days before her final trip there, Matsumoto had told her father:

Think of the smoke rising from Mount Mihara as my mortuary tablet.

Miharayama no kemuri o mitara watakushi no ihai to omotte kudasai.[32]

In both, the immortal smoke offers a consoling image that endures in the face of natural and unnatural death. As we saw above, this symbolism had long been

FIGURE 5. Billowing eternal smoke of Mount Mihara, 1930. Friedrich M. Trautz, *Japan: The Landscape, Architecture, Life of the People* (New York: Westermann, 1930).

crucial to the poetics associated with volcanos in particular. The volcano and its smoke offered a simultaneous promise of ephemerality and immortality.

When bidding her family to think of her as the volcano smoke, Matsumoto denies them the corpse or its memorialization into words on a mortuary stone. In its stead, she offers the natural symbol of smoke rising from the volcano. With her words, she disposes of her bloodied corpse and replaces it with poetic visions of wispy smoke.

Matsumoto had been quite explicit about her own sense that the poetic corpus she left behind was to substitute for her body. To her friends, she had repeatedly declared that she did not want to leave behind her exposed corpse when she died. (Ironically, this was reported in newspaper headlines again with a disingenuously mixed font size that drew the eye to the "**CORPSE** that she detested the idea of exposing.") She had also often claimed, "I would happily die if I could just write one poem that pleased me."[33]

Poetic composition was paramount. Matsumoto had reportedly proposed this return trip to Tomita with the suggestion that they travel not to die but to create beautiful poems inspired by the island's famed camelias. (Other less flattering accounts suggested that Tomita had been blackmailed with the threat of exposing

her role as accomplice in her other classmate's suicide at Mount Mihara the month before.) Curiously, though, rather than creating any of her own new poems during this trip, Matsumoto instead cited classical poets, as we saw above, one by Ariwara no Narihira in her note to her friend and another by Ono no Komachi, which she recited when ascending the volcano peak with Tomita:

Color of the flower	hana no iro wa
has already faded away.	utsuri ni keri na
While in idle thoughts	itazura ni
my life passes vainly by,	waga mi yo ni furu
as I watch the long rains fall.	nagame seshi ma ni[34]

Again here, she defers her own authorial voice in favor of a poetic citation that this time offers a negative example of what she does *not* want to say. According to Tomita, Matsumoto criticized this poem written when Ono no Komachi was in her late eighties as an "embarrassment for having lived so long" (*ikihaji no uta*).[35] Taken together, these comments suggest that Matsumoto believed her own bodily existence, especially an aged one, was no longer required or desirable if a poetic text or image could live on in its place. Her own choice of poetic imagery—the rising volcano smoke—is telling, for it points to an ephemeral but enduring presence; it goes but stays, too.

Before turning to consider how alarmed moralists tried to counter this imagery with less aestheticized visions of death by volcano, let us briefly compare Matsumoto's poetic choices to Fujimura's. The differences are as revealing as the similarities. Although she did not self-write her death by physically carving it into nature as Fujimura did, she, too, marked her prospective absence on the landscape and in poetry. What is striking is the different temporalities and perspectives. While Fujimura's situates the speaker of the poem at the moment just prior to the leap, Matsumoto fast-forwards to long afterward. Her disembodied voice speaks from a future point in time when her death has already passed and the body is gone, or at least transformed. If Fujimura's poem offers a point-of-view shot of him looking down from the head of the waterfall, with Matsumoto, the view is set further afield both spatially and temporally. A bodyless mourner mourns a bodyless object from afar.

Both views have the power to console. As we saw above in Fujimura's case when his friend Abe balked at the belated discovery of his body, the corpse can threaten to haunt the living. But what consoles are the words and images left behind by the dead and those preserved (and produced) by those left behind. Perhaps those who died in such a way as to ensure that there were no corporeal remains intuited this connection. In offering their final texts as a substitute, they might displace the specter of their dead body with their body of texts—to replace corpse with corpus—whether those writings were lengthy philosophical meditations like Fujimura's or the oblique, poetic fragments left behind by Matsumoto.

In Matsumoto's case, her body was never recovered. A poem and her photo lived on in her place at the family home. On the memorial set up by her father

FIGURE 6. Matsumoto Kiyoko's poem and photograph, from *butsudan* to national news. *Tokyo Asahi shimbun* (February 15, 1933).

at the household Buddhist altar was her photograph and this final composition written in her own hand:

For whose sake	*yosōwamu*
would I make a show of it?	*kokoro mo ima wa*
My heart now	*asa kasumi*
like the morning mist,	*mukau kai nashi*
setting out is futile.	*ta ga tame ni ka wa*[36]

This poem would seem to lack much power to console. The speaker's immobility here offers a strong point of contrast with Matsumoto's other poems that transport her, and us, to the beautiful landscape of Mount Mihara. Rather than as "smoke rising and rising at Mount Mihara," it situates her back in the home where she is being mourned, beside her aging father. Perhaps, though, as Harrison puts it, burial effects a "remaking of the world, as the dead take their 'proper' place in individual and collective memory."[37]

What we might call the afterimage of the dead can take many different forms, from death poems or photos displayed on Buddhist altars and graves or memorials to popular songs, films, and tabloid reporting. What is all too clear, however, is the fact that these afterimages do not always accord with the stated desires of the dead. When one of the Asahi reporters visited her father just moments after he had

found out about her death, he borrowed this last handwritten poem and her photograph to include in the national newspaper. While removing these items from the Buddhist altar, the journalist was reported to have "made a deep respectful bow that seemed to touch the old man's heart."[38] It was not this poem that made the national news, however. The newspaper photo instead featured her earlier poem celebrating the forever rising smoke at Mount Mihara (fig. 6).

Those who die rarely get the last, or even second to last, word on how they will be memorialized or represented.

SUICIDE PREVENTION: DISPLAYING THE DEAD

For the authorities, the words left behind by those who choose to die possessed the fearsome power to attract copycats. Especially if readers were able to situate themselves in the same spaces as its writer in a metaphorical or literal sense. As we saw with Fujimura, anything that placed him or those mourning him near the precipice were forbidden—his poem, the tree, his bodily remains, or even his memorial stone declaring "O! Here stands the monument to Fujimura Misao."

For potential followers at Mihara, it was instead any distanced perspective that worried contemporaries. As the poet Saitō Mokichi put it in an article in *Kokumin shinbun* in May 1933, "People who die at Mount Mihara are unaware of the truly barbaric nature of committing suicide, thinking it mysterious or beautiful. … When they see the volcanic smoke, they think leaping seems heroic."[39] Most worrisome was the distant volcanic smoke celebrated in Matsumoto's own poems and in other cultural productions. The combination of the peak's high visibility and natural beauty combined with the invisibility of the crater's interior offered the potential for an aestheticized distant spectacle, a vision that could take the reassuring form of cicadas taking flight into the sunlight or volcanic smoke rising forever.

With the ostensible aims of countering such perceptions and the not-so-subtle aims of selling a lot of newspapers, *Yomiuri shinbun* embarked on a large-scale investigation in May 1933 that promised "to prevent suicide by revealing the truth of the volcano interior" (fig. 7). The editorial announcing the venture lamented that "'Mount Mihara of the Sacred Fire' has been sadly transformed into the loathsome 'Mount Mihara of Death' due to the *heartless acts* of suicide jumpers who appear day in and day out. Deeply regretting this, our company secretly undertook this operation of greatest importance in the world." The exploration was designed as much to dispel this gloomy image that could harm tourism at Mount Mihara as to dissuade would-be suicides from leaping there. This would be accomplished by a demonstration of scientific rigor "unprecedented even in foreign countries" that would counter any illusions of a certain and aestheticized death in the crater. As Dr. Nakamura from Tokyo University put it, "If the exploration to the crater's bottom succeeds and we expose the pathetic appearance of those who committed suicide, we will put an end to the Mount Mihara patients who are drawn in by the mystery."[40]
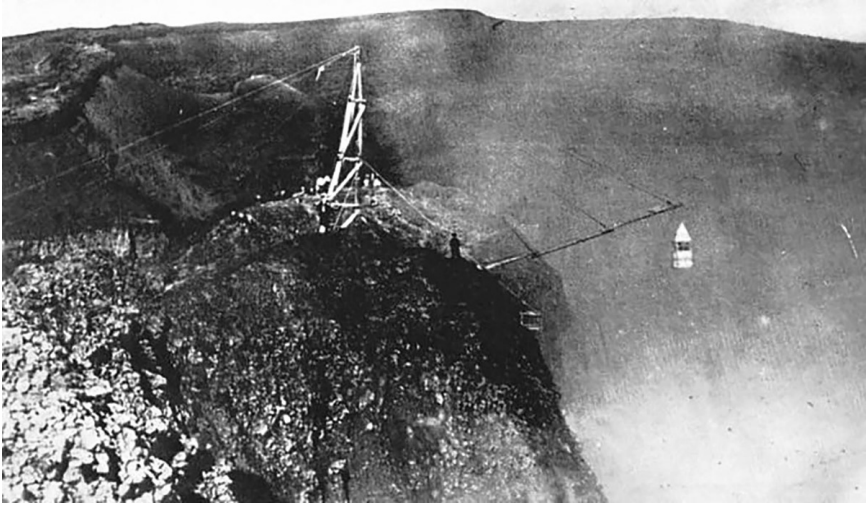
FIGURE 7. *Yomiuri shinbun*'s scientific probe of the volcano, July 1933. *Rekishi shashin* (July 1933), Rekishi Shashin Kai, Wikimedia Commons.

With much fanfare, *Yomiuri* readers could trace every step of the exploration, from the initial descent with a monkey, a pair of rabbits, and six marmots designed to test the effects of lava and gases to the discovery of corpses. The first discovery of a young shopkeeper's body was touted shamelessly in a headline that read, "Found a souvenir! [*Omiyage ga mitsukatta zo!*]," while another salaciously reported, "Corpses everywhere, even a half-naked woman." Only the final article conformed to the stated purpose of the descent: "The sought-after 'death by sacred fire' in reality is all too wretched."[41] Stories of corpses discovered on the ledges, starving there, dying slowly of smoke inhalation, or hitting a ledge early on and having to jump repeatedly in order to die uncovered this reality in all its wretchedness for readers.

Dying by jumping into a volcano seemed to offer assured death and the erasure of the physical body, a death without any messy remains. It is for these reasons that *The Complete Manual of Suicide* (1993) coarsely recommends dying at this outdated but picturesque spot: "Mount Mihara has the advantage that your corpse won't surface. Inside the mouth of the volcano is an unexplored region. Unlike [Aokigahara] Jukai, there are no massive search parties for corpses."[42]

If part of the attraction of dying by volcano was the notion that the body of the dead was no more, then displaying the corpse was the antidote. In a sense, this tactic resembled the Edo period practice of exposing the corpses of love suicides as punishment and disincentive. Left on display under bridges for three days or doubled up with feet and hands tied together, they were bundled into a straw mat and thrown nameless into a common grave. A 1723 shogunal edict deemed, "When a man and a woman have committed suicide for love, their bodies shall

be left unburied. If one of them survives, he shall be treated as a murderer. If both survive, they shall be put in the pillory for three days and reduced to the rank of beggars. It is strictly forbidden to write down and circulate, or act out, accounts of such deeds. Offenders will be prosecuted."[43]

At the time of the Mihara suicides, too, many professed that the media should self-censor representations of these self-deaths even while they endorsed the *Yomiuri* campaign to unearth the dead in all their gore. The campaign offered the perfect synergy of old and new suicide prevention tactics. Its roots could be traced back centuries to shogunal law while reflecting the much-touted "scientific" (*kagaku-teki*) spirit of the age and suiting the demands of *ero-guro* journalism.

Underpinning this campaign is a presumed relationship between corpses and texts. Romanticized perceptions of death encountered in aestheticized texts were thought to be countered only by facing the bodily remains of the dead, if not in reality then at least in prose or photos. This may seem paradoxical, but it makes sense when we recall the point that the burial of the dead and disposal of the physical body is what enables them to live on in the realm of representation.

TWEAKING THE SCRIPT

Unsurprisingly, the *Yomiuri* campaign was not successful in stemming the tide of suicides at Mount Mihara. Just days after the exploration concluded, as one headline put it, "The Sacred Fire, again, swallows another youth."[44] Despite the press hype over female-female love suicides and a crisis surrounding suicidal schoolgirls in the wake of Matsumoto's death, those who followed did not always share her same demographic. Newspaper reports from June and July of that year indicate that they also included males of all ages, family suicides, hetero- and same-sex-love suicides, ex-convicts, and runaway youths.[45]

Nor did these suicides neatly conform to any romanticized script. Those seeking to die at Mount Mihara may have chosen a location infused with romantic images of sacred fires and virginal maidens, but their mode of dying there—both their final words and their leaps—often conveyed a distinct sense of ironic detachment from any such prettified narratives. The leaps of many were performed in front of witnesses, either close friends so-called death guides or random passersby whom they enlisted unwillingly. They did not hike up in the dead of night to die without anyone knowing it. Far from it. Some chose flashy jumps, running leaps, or swan-like dives in daylight before the eyes of willing or unwilling spectators. One ninety-one-year-old man, who was restrained from jumping in 1934, reported that he was hoping to get the record for the oldest leaper.[46]

Most seem to have offered only terse and laconic farewells just before leaping: Matsumoto merely said, "My regards to everyone in the group" (*Gurūpu no minasan ni yoroshiku*); one young woman's final words were "Many thanks for your trouble" (*Gokurō deshita*) to a shopkeeper who tried to save her; a man bid

"Sayōnara everyone" to the sightseers milling about, while another apologized for going first (*Osaki ni sumimasen*); four young men who met by happenstance at the crater's edge took turns one by one, alternating "First me" (*Kondo wa ore*), "Next is me" (*Tsugi wa ore da*)"; and another, whom the teahouse guard tried to stop by calling out "Hello, hellooo" (*Moshi moshi*), responded only with "You gotta be kidding me. Buzz off [*Fuzakeru na*]".[47]

The casual and public nature of many suicides at Mount Mihara led Yamana Shōtarō to reflect that "the era of the single suicide has passed." He claimed that quiet, solitary suicides committed in locales like Kegon Falls following the Greco-Roman tradition were no more, or at least were no longer notable. If Fujimura's typified the Meiji period, Mount Mihara's, he claimed, reflected the 1920s and 1930s exhibitionism and voyeurism characteristic of *ero-guro* journalism and I-novelists who exposed their deepest flaws for all to see. With suicides now occurring at tourist destinations, on city streets, and on railroads, "openness," "playfulness," and "groupism" reign. "In the past," wrote Yamana, "suicides were committed in ways not to attract people's attention since it was regarded as a crime [*zaiaku*]. But nowadays, Mihara patients leap amid tourists in broad daylight."[48]

We should be wary of making sweeping generalizations about any era's suicides or the ways they are scripted. Exceptions (and omissions) abound that make any such attempts to neatly periodize suicides certain to fail. There is also a risk of flattening the diversity of any one era or locale. Some ascended Mount Mihara with a "death guide," like the first young woman who was accompanied by Tomita but in the end bid her on her way and chose to die without a witness present.[49] Those who imitated Fujimura and died "alone" at Kegon Falls cannot be said to really be dying solo since it meant joining, at least symbolically, a long line of priors. And as we saw above from the excoriating remarks made by his contemporaries, not all Meiji individuals endorsed or employed Fujimura's mode of self-writing or self-killing.

Moreover, as we will see below in part 2 on suicide notes, many examples from this era do not conform to the laconic notes, cheeky parting words, or spectacular public leaps for which Mihara became so famous. In fact, even the first recorded suicide at Mihara resembles Fujimura's more than any of its successors. In 1928, a twenty-seven-year-old man from the Tokyo suburbs ascended the mountain and carved into the branch of a cherry tree a brief notice marking "the journey of no return" (不帰の旅立標) besides his name and date. Into the dirt, he scratched out this message: "Life is difficult, death easy———I choose to die."[50]

What remains most striking about the Mihara examples is a seeming refusal to tap into any one designated script, whether ones featuring a romantic vision of besotted island girls and sailor boys lost at sea, images of conjugal bliss and love suicides in the fiery crater, abnormal temptresses who lead victims to their deaths unaware, or flippant flips taken on a whim. Yamana's above point that suicides and the writings left behind are intimately tied to contemporary literary developments

is worth highlighting, nonetheless. The self-writing of suicide could not help but be influenced by journalistic, literary, and scientific discourses, and vice versa. Not surprisingly, whereas Fujimura's high-minded, philosophical poem was largely conducive to highbrow poetic and literary adaptations, Mihara suicides fueled popular journalism, songs, movies, and even a Ginza department store exhibition of artifacts left behind called "Nights at Mount Mihara."[51]

Notwithstanding the shift in register, moralistic discourses surrounding suicide and its writing demonstrated considerable continuity. If Fujimura's poem was subjected to overt censorship, or what we might call an un-writing, then at Mihara, concerned parties sought to erase any euphemistic, poetic visions of death with overrepresentations. Pathologizing narratives that exposed the interior reality of the volcano and the psychological interior of "patients of Mihara" strove to undo aestheticizing ones that had been so key to luring tourists and suicides alike to the island from the start.

In the wake of these famed suicides at these famed locales came competing attempts to rewrite, un-write, and overwrite the origin stories that had inscribed suicide into the locale so pervasively in the first place. These rival acts of writing competed to represent the dead for eternity. In the next chapter, I turn to consider less remarked (and less remarkable) urban and suburban suicide sites that nonetheless depended on the many markings left behind.