

You Forbid Me to Walk

Yokota Hiroshi's Disability Poetics

In a scene near the end of Hara Kazuo's 1972 documentary film *Goodbye CP* (*Sayōnara CP*), Yokota Hiroshi kneels on the ground outside Shinjuku station in Tokyo. Yokota has cerebral palsy, a term that refers to a group of permanent neurological conditions that affect movement, coordination, muscle tone, and balance. His head and arms are in constant motion; his feet, wearing only black socks, are splayed out to his sides; his elbows and wrists are at sharp angles. The dolly-mounted camera rapidly moves forward across a concrete plaza toward him, coming to a stop when he fills the frame. He slowly and carefully writes something with a piece of chalk on the concrete ground, in reverse order starting with the rightmost character: "Yokota Hiroshi poem" (*Yokota Hiroshi shi* 横田弘 詩) (figure 6).

The constant motion of his hands and arms makes this a laborious process; the chalk fractures under the pressure he applies to the pavement. As he finishes writing his name, he begins to draw a large circle around himself and the words he has just written, one small segment at a time (figure 7). While he draws this circle—at once stage, altar, and protective barrier—he begins to speak: "Please listen to my poem."¹ His voice is heavily shaped by his condition's effects on the muscles of his jaw, lips, tongue, and throat. "This is 'Legs,'" he says. The camera tilts up to the large crowd of pedestrians surrounding him at a distance, and he recites the beginning of his poem (figure 8).

Crowds of people gathered around me
 You all have legs
 You all—you all—I—you all forbid me to walk
 And only through this do you keep your legs.



FIGURE 6. Yokota Hiroshi writing the character for “poem” followed by his name in a still from *Goodbye CP* (*Sayonara CP*), directed by Hara Kazuo, 1972.



FIGURE 7. Yokota Hiroshi drawing a chalk circle around himself and his words in *Goodbye CP* (*Sayonara CP*), directed by Hara Kazuo, 1972.



FIGURE 8. Yokota Hiroshi begins to recite his poem “Legs” to a gathered crowd in *Goodbye CP* (*Sayonara CP*), directed by Hara Kazuo, 1972.

Crowds of people!
Gathered legs!
You—on what basis do you all forbid me to walk?²

The camera tilts from the crowd up toward the buildings behind them, and then to the sky; the frame freezes and another voice suddenly cuts into the poetry reading from off-screen. Two police officers ask who’s in charge; Yokota says he is. “What are you recording? You’re bothering everyone,” says one officer. “This has become a freak show. Please stop,” says the other. Abruptly, the scene ends.

Yokota Hiroshi (1933–2013) was a poet and one of Japan’s most prominent disability activists, who in a more than six-decade career of writing and political organization has left behind a legacy that extends far beyond his appearance in this film. Yet *Goodbye CP*, the first feature film by the now-famous documentarian Hara Kazuo, introduced the disability movement in Japan to many for the first time. Hara, who was an assistant at the Tokyo Kōmei Metropolitan School—the most prominent public school in Japan for children with physical disabilities, founded in 1932 and still active—later described the central concept for *Goodbye CP* as the “dichotomy between ‘the healthy vs. the disabled,’” and the necessarily “antagonistic relationship” between the two groups that results from that division.³

This chapter will focus not on Hara's depiction of Yokota but on the works of Yokota himself as a crucial rethinking of poetry, media, and embodiment. This includes the filmed performance described above along with a wide variety of his printed poems, especially those published in literary magazines, anthologies, and nonfiction books throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Yokota was a major figure within the broader context of disability culture and activism in postwar Japan, especially as a member of Shinonome (Daybreak)—the amateur literary coterie (*dōjin*) and magazine for poets with cerebral palsy—and as a leader of the disability activist group Aoi Shiba no Kai (The Green Lawn Association). In his work with these groups and throughout his poetic career, Yokota's poems made the disabled body itself into his central medium of expression and site of experimentality. Focusing on Yokota's "disability poetics"—how his poetic acts function through and in relation to the body, and questions of ability and disability—I will consider the ways in which he explored how a body otherwise can make poetry otherwise. Yokota used form and language in his poetic work in order to challenge conventional conceptions of what it means to be disabled, what it means to have and be a body, and finally, what it means to mediate that body through text, image, and assistive technologies.

There are certainly plentiful examples of, say, blindness, deafness, prostheses, immobility, muteness, and so on that are repeatedly returned to in the broader poetic sphere by "disabled" and "able-bodied" poets alike as motif or metaphor. There is also no shortage of artistic works in Japan and elsewhere portraying people with various disabilities as characters or subjects. But Yokota and many of the other Shinonome poets rejected the use of disability as only a metaphor or topic to represent. They actively aimed to make works that differed from those made with conventionally abled bodies by means of carefully self-reflexive acts of composition and publication, and by experimenting with poetic form and modes of narration and sensation. Yokota's poems—live performances of poems, cinematic performances of poems, poetry collections, and poetry magazines—also consistently question not just what it means to be disabled in the world but also how a world can make a body disabled. They consider what a body can do in assemblage with a wheelchair and typewriter and limbs that work nonnormatively, often of their own accord; they shed light on what it means to recast disability as generative, as a remaking of dominant literary, medial, corporeal, and legislative modes.

First, a return to "Legs."

"LEGS" AND DISABILITY

"Legs" ("Ashi"), the poem Yokota performs to the gathered crowd in *Goodbye CP*, is a new version of a poem that was published two years earlier, the first version addressed not to spectators but to the legs themselves.

Legs
 Passing before my eyes
 Wearing miniskirts
 Pleated pants
 White canvas shoes
 Little sandals
 You vast crowd of legs!
 Look back at me

That's right all of you
 Are called legs
 Only because you do not let me walk
 Only by forbidding me to walk about the streets on my knees
 Are you recognized as legs
 Only through this
 Can you sing, work, laugh,
 Arrogantly sprawl out
 And so I
 Set up my four-and-a-half tatami-sized altar

Legs
 Now passing before my eyes
 You vast crowd of legs!
 Look back at this man
 Today I will get off the altar myself
 Because here I am alive⁴

In both the filmed and printed versions of the poem, one sentiment is especially striking: in the former, “You forbid me to walk” (*anatagata wa watashi ga aruku koto o kinzuru*); in the latter, “You do not let me walk” (*omaetachi wa watashi ga aruku no o yurusanai*). It is not “I am not able to walk,” as might be expected from a conventional understanding of disability, but *you forbid* me to walk. Yokota, addressing the nondisabled spectators and readers, frames his words as an accusation. The question of ability and disability thus departs from being about the capacities of any one disabled body and shifts the focus onto the process of *enabling* and *disabling*. Who is disabled? Who makes whom disabled, and how?

“You forbid me to walk.” The line can be understood in several ways, each of which sheds light on a different mode of thinking about disability. The first and most straightforward is tied to disability rights movements’ language of accessibility, focused on the improvement of policy: in an inaccessible place like the train station at the time of Yokota’s performance, infrastructure designed by and for people with normative mobility—without ramps or elevators—does not give access to those without.

But the last verb in this line is also far from straightforward: “You forbid me to walk.” How might we understand this argument that he is not *allowed* or *permitted* to walk, rather than the more conventional understanding that due to the form of his body and its condition that he is not *able* to walk? It is significant here to note again that Yokota is not performing this poem from his wheelchair but rather is kneeling, and writing, on the ground. Indeed, throughout *Goodbye CP* Yokota drags himself across spaces on his hands and knees, often with bare feet, after a lifetime of either using a wheelchair or being carried by others, at least in public. The critic Takasugi Shingo highlighted the centrality of this act to the film in an article that came out the same year. “The act of a person walking,” says the first line of the article; “A documentary film that records this head-on. This is *Goodbye CP*. A person walking was filmed.”⁵

Yokota deliberately spectacularizes his way of walking on his knees, his body constantly shaking and staggering—an unusual and strenuous mode of travel—as a way to emphasize the roads, stairs, and other infrastructure built without someone like him in mind. Even further than that, he defamiliarizes the act of “walking” itself by engaging in it by means of an entirely different use of limbs, moving in unexpected ways. In this light, “you forbid me to walk” becomes less a question of policy than one of redefinition, a rethinking of what it means to perform an act like “walking” that is normally not questioned by those who have no reason to—that is, the non-disabled. Using his body otherwise, Yokota challenges an act as common as walking and refuses to take its conventions as a given when those conventions serve to marginalize him and people who move like him. “You do not let me walk”: you do not let my modes of travel be considered “walking,” to be considered normal.

“Normality,” of course, can only be produced alongside “abnormality.” There is a “normal” way of walking, and everything else is “abnormal”; certain bodies are deemed “normal,” and any bodies that diverge from this are not. Only by preventing him from walking, says Yokota, can nondisabled people “keep your legs” (*ashi wa kakuho sarete iru*), “are you [legs] recognized as legs” (*ashi to mitomerareru*). On a fundamental level, an aim of this poetry reading, this film, and many disability activists’ protest actions around the world was to make disabled people visible. People with disabilities—physical, cognitive, sensory, intellectual—were often shut away in institutions and homes, and they certainly were not thought of by nondisabled society as having a collective identity that could be mobilized into political action. In the context of Japan’s postwar high-growth economy, disabled people who could not work could not “contribute,” were left out of decision-making and pushed out of public spaces. Recall the police officers who halt Yokota’s performance, calling his poetry reading a “freak show” (*misemono*), unable to see the significance of the deliberate public spectacle. But making disabled bodies visible in public like in those actions documented by *Goodbye CP* made the structures that allow certain people to be considered “normal,” “able-bodied,” “healthy,” or “productive”—and others not—more visible as well.

“You forbid me to walk.” This short statement, and the poem it came from, thus takes us through several distinct approaches to disability. One might think about

this accusation as a question of rights, as a statement in favor of the improvement of current societies, infrastructures, and policies to make them more accessible to disabled people. Or the focus might be placed instead on disability as a social construct, one that *disables* certain bodies within a society designed for bodies with a set of assumed “normal” characteristics and capacities. Finally, it might be thought of in terms of what might be called a critical disability studies, where even the givenness of the body itself (and its everyday tasks like walking) is brought into question, a stance that refuses any norm to which bodies are made to cleave.

DISABILITY POETICS

The definition of disability is a main site of contention within disability studies and disability communities. One of the best-known contributions of disability activism that was later developed in certain branches of disability studies is, as mentioned before, the idea of disability as a social construct. A woman who uses a wheelchair, for example, is not *inherently* “disabled” but *becomes* disabled when she encounters an inaccessible environment, like a building with a staircase but no ramp or elevator. This notion of disability is often contrasted with “impairment,” which is a state of having a lack/loss or abnormality in a limb, organ, or bodily system. Impairments are real characteristics of bodies and lived experiences, but disability is the product of societies and infrastructures that do not take nonnormative bodies into account.

More recently, however, what is often called a “critical disability studies” has emerged. This is an approach that rejects the neat categories separating “disabled” and “nondisabled” people—and even “disability” and “ability”—in favor of a refusal to recognize the “givenness” of any body, stressing how disability is an intersectional and multivalent phenomenon. Some strands within critical disability studies also take issue with the above distinction between disability and impairment. In proposing a “radical model” of disability, for example, A. J. Withers calls this distinction a “false binary” between bodies and culture that was once useful but is a tool of “continued oppression”; impairment itself, they point out, is also created through a constructed social meaning.⁶ Others such as Margrit Shildrick and Petra Kuppers emphasize the potential of disability to reveal how *all* bodies are constantly in the process of becoming, always in assemblage with other bodies and machines and environments, thus disrupting the norms of corporeality. Critical disability studies itself, of course, is not without its critiques. This kind of deconstructive approach toward the categories and ideologies of disability often stresses a kind of all-encompassing diversity of bodies that smooths over the differences between those bodies at the same time it purports to extol the singular characteristics of each. In other words, an approach that stresses that *all* bodies are different, porous, and contingent can all too easily ignore the lived experiences of impairment and the realities of uneven access, recognition, and power.

It is against this unevenness perpetrated by “able-bodied” society that Yokota writes much of his poetry. One consistent inflection of Yokota’s work over several

decades is what Arai Yūki—the pathbreaking disability studies scholar, who has written extensively on Yokota’s work—refers to as Yokota’s “poetics of accusation” (*kokuhatsu no shigaku*).⁷ The word “accusation” (*kokuhatsu*) comes up yet again in the subtitle of the abovementioned review of *Goodbye CP*, which described the film as an “accusatory thing” (*kokuhatsu suru mono*).⁸ Far from the shame, pity, or “inspirational” hopefulness that often characterizes writing about disabled people (and also much autobiographical writing on disability at this time in Japan), what we tend to see in Yokota’s poems is indeed a stance of indictment, of anger at a society that treats him and other disabled people in a violent and dehumanizing way. This is a key aspect of Yokota’s poetics, but not the only one. More broadly, Yokota’s approach to disability in his work is complex and often oblique, without many of the expected tropes of literary works that take up disability as their subject. His poems are certainly often accusatory, but just as often they are elegiac, sardonic, or hermetic, each mode expressing a different facet of his politics.

One way of bringing together these threads is through the concept of “disability poetics,” a framework for understanding how poetry and other media engage with and evoke nonnormative embodiment, sensation, and cognition. Christina Scheuer describes how disability poetics centers the “body’s experiences and ways of knowing” in their form and language, linking the somatic and linguistic to “express a diversity of bodily practices and encounters.”⁹ Disability poetics also places the emphasis on poets who themselves have disabilities—who create poems that depict disability from the inside, “necessarily structured by the poet’s daily lived experience, with its attendant political and social contexts.”¹⁰ The disabled body within disability poetics is not a “vehicle for metaphor,” as is so often the case in works that depict disabled subjects, but rather is *co-expressed* with poetic language. The poet foregrounds a multifarious connectedness between the body and the forces, objects, environments, and institutions that are conventionally considered to be outside the “body” but are in fact crucial to its being and expression.¹¹ Along these lines, Yokota’s poetry deliberately incorporates a diverse set of ways of thinking about disability—focused on rights, socially constructed, and critically expanded—in its form and content, with the possible implications of “Legs” above being just one example. There are poems where his own disabled body is described in excruciating detail, but just as many where the body is seemingly not present, with disability evoked through unusual approaches to sensation or in playing with the “body” of the poem itself. Indeed, throughout his poetic practice there is a commitment to experimentality that rivals that of far better-known figures of Japan’s illustrious avant-garde, yet creations by disabled practitioners have historically been left out of such movements except in certain narrow categories like “outsider art.”

In exploring Yokota Hiroshi’s disability poetics, we find an idiosyncratic theorization of disability, the body, and language that does not quite fit neatly into any one of the strands within disability thinking and activism described above. Not only that, his work anticipates by several decades many of these approaches in disability

studies today, a field that is still largely dominated by the English-speaking world with the vast majority of cited theorists and texts coming from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. One unique feature of the disability movements in Japan—and something that makes them particularly relevant to increasingly prevalent discussions on the intersections of disability, literary, and media studies—is that many of their leaders, including Yokota, were poets. Their disability poetics manifested across their literary writings, theoretical writings, and political actions, with poetic practice leading directly to their later activism.

YOKOTA HIROSHI AND DISABILITY MOVEMENTS

Yokota Hiroshi was born in Yokohama to a working-class family in 1933. Showing symptoms of severe cerebral palsy from birth, he was not accommodated to participate in obligatory schooling and never received a formal education. His older brother helped him learn how to read and write with the help of wooden block toys.¹² He started writing poetry in 1955, joining the Kanagawa-area amateur literary coterie Katachi after reading about them in a newspaper; the group helped him self-publish his first poetry collection, *Walking (Ayumi)*, shortly afterward in 1958. He actively followed the publications of the disability activist group Aoi Shiba no Kai, which published its first magazine in 1957, and he also started submitting to *Shinonome*, an associated amateur literary magazine by and for poets with cerebral palsy, starting with its forty-second issue in 1960.¹³ Yokota was unhappy with his living situation, which required him to be confined to various relatives' homes. Hanada Shunchō, the head of the Shinonome coterie, introduced Yokota to Maharaba Village (Maharaba mura), a radical independent living colony for people with cerebral palsy that existed from 1964 to 1969 around Ganjōji Temple on Mount Kankyo in Ibaraki Prefecture; Yokota moved there in its first year. There he met and married his wife, Nagayama Yoshiko, who also had cerebral palsy; in 1968, she gave birth to their son, Satoru, and Yokota moved out of the colony, a fraught decision that resulted from his desire not to isolate his nondisabled son from wider society.¹⁴

It was around this time he began to participate fully in disability activism, forming the Japanese People with Cerebral Palsy Association “Aoi Shiba no Kai” Kanagawa Prefectural Organization (Nihon nōsei mahi-sha kyōkai “Aoi shiba no kai” Kanagawa-ken rengōkai) along with several friends who also used to live at Maharaba Village. As the head of this subgroup of Aoi Shiba no Kai for several decades, Yokota spearheaded an activist strategy that first gained prominence in 1970, when members of the group protested the decision of the Kanagawa courts to treat a woman who killed her child with cerebral palsy with more leniency than if the child had been nondisabled. He published several books of essays in this decade alone, including *The Ideology of Killing the Disabled (Shōgaisha-goroshi no shisō)* in 1974 and *Fallen Grass: The Emergence and Collapse of Communal Living for People with Cerebral Palsy (Korobi-gusa: Nōsei mahi-sha no aru kyōdō seikatsu*

no shōsei to hōkai) in 1975. He also published four more poetry collections: *Flower Core* (*Hanashibe*) in 1969, *The Day the Sea Roars* (*Umi no naru hi*) in 1985, *And, Now* (*Soshite, ima*) in 1993, and *On Phantoms* (*Maboroshi o*) in 2010, his last work before his death at age eighty in 2013.

As it sheds light on much of Yokota's poetic and activist work, his four-point platform for Aoi Shiba no Kai, published in 1970, is worth quoting in its entirety:

- *We identify ourselves as people with Cerebral Palsy (CP).* We recognize our position as “an existence which should not exist” in the modern society. We believe that this recognition should be the starting point of our whole movement, and we act on this belief.
- *We assert ourselves aggressively.* When we identify ourselves as people with CP, we have a will to protect ourselves. We believe that a strong self-assertion is the only way to achieve self-protection, and we act on this belief.
- *We deny love and justice.* We condemn egoism held by love and justice. We believe that mutual understanding, accompanying the human observation which arises from the denial of love and justice, means the true well-being, and we act on this belief.
- *We do not choose the way of problem solving.* We have learnt from our personal experiences that easy solutions to problems lead to dangerous compromises. We believe that an endless confrontation is the only course of action possible for us, and we act on this belief.¹⁵

A fifth point he added at a later date ties more directly to Yokota's vision of a cerebral palsy culture:

- *We deny able-bodied civilization.* We recognize that modern civilization has managed to sustain itself only by excluding us, people with CP. We believe that creation of our own culture through our movement and daily life leads to the condemnation of modern civilization, and we act on this belief.¹⁶

In his poetry and essays—themselves a kind of “endless confrontation,” as articulated in the above platform—each of these points is repeatedly articulated, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, as recurrent images, motifs, and arguments. This begins with his very first published work, fifteen years earlier.

THE LIMITS OF THE MIND'S EYE

In Yokota Hiroshi's afterword to his first poetry collection, 1958's *Walking* (*Ayumi*), he reflects upon the role poetry plays in his life:

What is poetry? I don't have a definitive answer yet. But for me, at least, it has become the light for me to live by. I am more grateful than words can say to my parents, who raised me after I was diagnosed with infant cerebral palsy shortly after birth, still more to my older sister and brother-in-law who cared for me after my mother passed away when I was eighteen. But since I am a living human being, sometimes I am attacked by a loneliness that such love

cannot compensate for. It is at those times that poetry is my only consolation. It might be a bad thing to write poems with thoughts such as these, and that might be the limitation of my poetry. But I find it difficult now to escape from such ideas. This book is a little signpost toward the road of how I will live from now on. It is on this foundation that I want to keep walking steadily, whatever life I have remaining.¹⁷

Here Yokota centers the idea of “walking”—the thing that, more than a decade later, he would frame as the thing dominant society “forbids” him to do—and renders it otherwise, not as conventional ambulation but as a way out of the potential “limitations of [his] poetry” (*shi no genkai*). It is also limitation itself—of poetry, expression, imagination, and the body—that became one of his central concerns from the very beginning of his poetic career.

In “Square Sky” (“*Shikakui sora*”), Yokota’s first published poem—which appeared in the second issue of the amateur literary journal *Katachi* in 1955, when he was twenty-two years old, and reprinted as the first poem in *Ayumi*—many elements of his poetry have already emerged fully formed. In his approach to language, imagery, and representations of his body and his relationship to the world, we can find a starting point for the particular disability poetics that Yokota develops over the next five and a half decades.

I do not know the extent of the sky
 The sky is always fitted into a frame of black wood
 A square thing
 Through this square sky
 Sometimes clouds glide listlessly from right to left
 Sometimes birds fly diagonally across it
 And sometimes
 Multicolored laundry
 Looking like it smells of soap
 Takes up most of the square sky
 When this square sky
 Becomes faintly misty I rejoice that spring has come
 When it is deeply cleansed I grieve at the arrival of autumn
 This is me that people call a cripple¹⁸

When Yokota wrote this poem he was spending the vast majority of his time in his room—Japanese cities in 1955 were hardly accessible environments for a wheelchair user. “Square Sky” is heavy with the sense of claustrophobia and confinement brought on by his living situation and his body’s lack of mobility in its environment. Within his one-room universe, the “sky” is only the view from a single square, wood-framed window, a mediated “thing” only accessible through vision from the distance, the exterior completely folded into the interior. As Arai notes, all of his senses, from scent (soap) to sound (birds), are collapsed into sight.¹⁹ There is a distinct feeling that there is a “real” world outside the window that Yokota has only limited, virtual access

to, and it is this *limited experience of the world* that, Yokota says in the last line, makes people call him “a cripple” (*katawamono*, a pejorative term).

This is an important reversal of the expectations surrounding disability and identity, and one we can find throughout his work. In this poem from the mid-1950s—written well before the emergence of global disability movements and the emphasis on disability as a construct created by an unaccommodating society and not the “failure” of an individual body—Yokota already shows more than a glimmer of his later activist consciousness. In this final line, it is not he who considers himself a “cripple,” and it is not the way his body is that makes him such; rather, it is something he is *called* by other people. Furthermore, the reason they call him that seems not because of the way his body looks but because of the way *he looks*—in other words, because of the way “*sonna boku*” (literally “that I” or “I who is like that”) can only experience the sky (and the rest of the world) through narrow mediation.

These themes are expanded upon further and made even more explicit in a later poem, “Cold Heart” (“Hieru kokoro”), from his 1969 collection, *Hanashibe* (*Flower Core*).

“Today was so nice out
 I could see Mount Fuji, clear as day”
 said my aunt, who just came back from an outing
 “Oh, it’s not just today!
 You can see it all the time around the end of fall.”
 It was in the mid-afternoon
 with a late November chill

I do not know the real Fuji
 so when someone says Fuji
 the prints of Hokusai are what immediately come to mind
 but in my head
 even though there’s Fuji through Hokusai’s careful eye
 there is no form left to its own nature
 even though there’s the beauty of his deformed ridges
 there is no joy in following smooth slopes with a naked eye
 and I
 came to believe that was the real thing
 convinced that this was the real Fuji
 my heart
 is always full
 of these deformed things

“I want to climb Mount Fuji, even just once”
 said my cousin
 me too even just once
 I think I want to see the real Mount Fuji
 I think I want to know the real world²⁰

Again, Yokota here considers the gaps between the experiences in which he is able or allowed to participate and those of the nondisabled family around him. His aunt's story about seeing Mount Fuji, and his cousin's exclamation of her desire to climb it one day, set off a series of introspections about his own desires and fears surrounding his relationship to the world. Once more, there is an anxiety around his own experiences, which he sees as virtual, as opposed to what he imagines as an encounter with the "real." While for his aunt, seeing Mount Fuji is a somewhat noteworthy experience, it is implied to be a regular one; it is implied that for Yokota, however, due to the limits set on his mobility, even *seeing* Fuji is something he can only dream about. In the last stanza, his cousin expresses her desire to, "even just once," climb Mount Fuji. Her fantasy is hardly out of reach; hundreds of thousands of people do this every year, and her body seemingly has the capacity to do so. "Me too," thinks Yokota, but he is not referring to climbing Mount Fuji; to do this is so far outside the realm of possibility he does not even allow himself the thought. Rather, he expresses his desire to *see* the real Fuji (*hontō no Fuji-san o mitai to omou*). Just seeing Fuji might be something trivial for people with normative mobility, but for Yokota, the seeing itself becomes the fantasy, the impossible act that he longs for.

Even more striking is another collapse of all experience into the visual/virtual in the middle section of the poem: like the sky in "Square Sky," which becomes only the view outside one window, "Mount Fuji" to Yokota is only Fuji as mediated through the famous woodblock prints of Katsushika Hokusai, known for works like the "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" (including "The Great Wave Off Kanagawa"). Again, like in the previous poem, it is not his own body but that mediated experience *itself* that Yokota portrays as disabling. In this poem, Hokusai's version of Mount Fuji's ridges, while beautiful, are described as *henkei*, a word that when applied to a body means "deformed"; Yokota is rueful that the image of Fuji that he convinced himself was "real" is instead just one among the many "deformed things" (*henkei sareta mono*) filling up his heart and mind. His body itself, instead, is made implicitly present through the description of his "naked eye," which in Japanese is *nikugan*—literally meaning "flesh-eye" or "meat-eye." Rather than the convention of a poetic vision that is separate from the body, free to virtually roam the world and cosmos, Yokota's vision in these early poems is firmly enfleshed, with both physical sight and virtual sight—the vision of the mind's eye—being subject to the limitations imposed upon his body.

YOKOTA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SHINONOME

Yokota's blossoming as a poet largely occurred across the 1960s in the pages of *Shinonome* (which means "dawn" or "daybreak"). Shinonome was an amateur literary coterie (*dōjin*) with its own literary magazine, published from 1947 to 2012, written by and for people with cerebral palsy. It was also eventually a parent body of Aoi Shiba no Kai, which eventually became the most influential group of disability

activists in Japan, of which Yokota became one of its leaders. The birthplace of Shinonome was the Tokyo Kōmei Metropolitan School for physically disabled children (the same school in which Hara Kazuo, the director of *Goodbye CP*, later worked as an assistant). Although there were public schools for the blind and deaf in the 1890s, there were none for children with physical disabilities until the Kōmei school was founded in June 1932.²¹ The coterie was launched by the graduates of the Kōmei school's "postgraduate course," who received an especially deep and broad education in Japanese literature—indeed, the longtime head of Shinonome, the poet Hanada Shunchō (1922–2017), repeatedly emphasized the central role of literature in the development of disability culture and consciousness.²² Shinonome's literary magazine was first published in May 1947; in its first years, it was a handwritten circular (most of the issues of which are now lost) with the idiosyncratic handwriting characteristic of many people with cerebral palsy.²³ Each issue featured a wide variety of work but was largely centered around poetry—haiku, tanka, and free verse. There were also many essays, responses to current events, reviews of books and films, advertisements, art, and short biographies of contributors (which will be touched on again later). By and large, especially in the first few decades of its existence, it was one of the few sites for public self-expression by and for disabled people—especially those confined to their homes or institutions—and, as Arai emphasizes, we can find in its pages many of the structures of thinking and networks of relationships that formed the foundation of later disability movements in Japan.²⁴

In *Shinonome* as before, Yokota's body continued to be a central image in his poetic works, but always in a way that resisted conventional depictions of the "disabled body" in literature and elsewhere. It is those external forces—particularly medical institutions and professionals—that actively tried to define his body as disabled and which are the focus in Yokota's first poem published in *Shinonome* magazine in 1960 (and thus his first actively aimed at a disabled audience): "Patient's Chart" ("Karute").

"It's a real pity,
but you're not going to get any better than this, you knoww?"

Name of Disease:
Spastic paralysis due to infant cerebral palsy

"This isn't something
You can cure with a single injection, you knoww?"

Right shoulder elevation about 40°
Hand and finger movements sluggish

"Try stretching your leg out more
Ahaa, just what I thought, your knees have gotten crooked, haven't they?"

A pronounced curvature
In both knee joints

"If you're touched by other people there
Your joints are going to get completely stiff, you knoww?"

Second degree of severity confirmed
On the statistical table for laws concerning those with physical disabilities

"Well, take care of yourself
And try moving on your own, even if you have to gasp for breath, okayy?"²⁵

Yokota's body, which is at the center of this poem, is described in extreme detail; unlike most of his other poems written around this time, however, it is not explicitly written in the first person. Each of the poem's two-line stanzas alternates between two types of speech: quoted speech from what seems to be a doctor or nurse, and descriptions of Yokota's bodily characteristics in highly medicalized language, as if they were written on the titular patient's chart. The person who is speaking has a bedside manner that is far from gentle or compassionate; using everyday language instead of medical terminology, the figure instructs, chastises, and diagnoses the reader (as a young Yokota) in a curt and casual way. There is also an extreme sense of condescension, which is evoked in the original by ending each of that voice's couplets with extended *nees* and *naas*, rendered here by doubled final letters. The other stanzas, in the disembodied "diagnostic" voice, are replete with dense, specialized kanji and vocabulary that describe Yokota's "spastic paralysis" and label him as having a "second-degree" disability according to governmental regulations. The focus again is on the *external* definition of him and his body as disabled, both within the medical and health policy systems and through the voice of a healthcare professional who gruffly points out the failures, lacks, and grim future of Yokota's body.²⁶

The fact that this was published as part of Yokota's first set of poems for *Shinonome* is itself significant. A key part of the structure of *Shinonome* is its use of autobiography and biography. Apart from the poems themselves—some, but not all, of which speak about personal experiences of the poet—every issue ends with a series of short biographical notes on each poet. In itself this is not unusual for a literary journal, but what is striking is the addition of one element to the usual date and place of birth, educational background, and so on: a self-identification of the poet's "condition," usually some form of cerebral palsy, but occasionally other type of paralysis, like those stemming from a spinal injury.

Why is this the case? Certainly, the journal is the product of a coterie of poets with physical disabilities, almost all of whom can be described as having cerebral palsy. Judging by the essays, editorial introductions, and targeted advertisements, the expected audience of the journal, too, is other disabled people. The presence of the specific nature of the poets' disabilities in their profiles can be

considered in several ways. One is related to identity: the specific nature of a poet's disability is included as a self-description in a way analogous to the biographical elements of age, hometown, and schooling that precede it; including their specific disability gives a fuller view of them as a person, pushing against assumptions of "able-bodiedness."

Another way this can be thought of is as a form of resistance to the medical model of disability, one replete with nomenclature for every specific form of physical variance—a model of naming, and then of "rehabilitation" or "cure." The extremely specific, medicalized terminology used by the poets in these autobiographic or biographic blurbs might at first seem to fit right into this model, making *Shinonome's* bio page read like a series of patient charts like the one in Yokota's poem above. Most of these poets met each other in specific educational and rehabilitative institutions for children and youth with physical disabilities, where the language of such diagnoses would be inescapable. One way to think about this relationship to diagnosis and classification is described by the disability theorist and poet with cerebral palsy, Eli Clare: "I want to consider diagnosis as just another system of classification, and cerebral palsy as a single category within that system. As such, diagnosis defines which bodymind conditions are pathological, names them, charts the connections between them. It sometimes provides us access to vital medical technology and treatment and other times pathologizes our entire beings. All too often it is brandished as authority, our bodyminds bent to match diagnostic criteria rather than vice versa."²⁷

It is this complex and fraught relationship to diagnosis that these biographies play with in their using and reusing this kind of language. The specificity of these terms reflects the enormous diversity of these poets' bodies, a diversity that is all too easily smoothed over by a society that often thinks of "disabled people" as a monolithic group. In this context, the naming of particular conditions by the poets themselves—rather than by doctors or government agencies—becomes an act of self-identification. The gesture of using the words that were used to define them in the context of their autobiographies as writers strikes one as simultaneously empowering, rueful, and tongue-in-cheek.

Yokota's "Deep-Sea Fish" ("Shinkaigyo"), published in the same issue, is strikingly different from any of his other work up until this point:

eyes searching for
lost light
are no more

enduring
silent water pressure
the whole body became antenna

today too poisoned wine
has sharply soaked through²⁸

Completely divorced from any conventional idea of life writing, “Deep-Sea Fish” instead is almost Surrealist in its language, presenting the reader with an imagined landscape of the deep ocean. Yet this poem, too, is an exploration at the edges of Yokota’s disability poetics, focusing on embodiment, sensation, and mediation *otherwise*: each section, in turn, considers blindness, sensation, and injury. No humans nor animals explicitly appear, but an organismic presence is implied. The beginning has disembodied “eyes” that are instantly negated out of existence, an act of “seeing” that occurs without either light or sight organs. In the next stanza, some unspecified “whole body” (*zenshin*) is “antenna-fied” (*shok-kaku-ka shita*), becoming a sensory appendage characteristic of nonhuman animals. In the last stanza—“today too poisoned wine / has sharply soaked through” (*dokushu wa kyō mo / surudoku shimitooru*)—not much is clear besides a feeling of chronic hurt: “poisoned wine” has “sharply” penetrated something (perhaps the “whole body” of the previous stanza), and, what’s more, this is seemingly a regular occurrence (“today too”).

YOKOTA AND MASS MEDIA

One of Yokota’s most reprinted works is “Pinwheel” (“Kazaguruma”), another seemingly autobiographical work that uses startlingly surreal imagery to complicate conventional tropes.

Since my childhood days
it had been weakly spinning

On a quiet night with the nonstop chirping of crickets
in the mystery of the transparent colors
revolving in my mother’s eyes
I came to bear a little longing
and a faint fear
with my whole body

For the first time
wind blew through my heart
in the sunlight of a languid autumn afternoon
It was only the red enamel
adorning the surface
that brittlely went up in flames²⁹

The poem focuses on a particular moment between the narrator (again, seemingly Yokota himself) and his mother, likely in his early childhood. The “whole body” (*zenshin*) of “Deep-Sea Fish” returns here, only this time as a vessel of affect, depicted as something that “came to bear” (*uketometa*) longing and fear from his mother’s eyes. “For the first time,” a wind blows through the narrator’s heart—the titular pinwheel—which was until that point only “weakly spinning.” Finally, “red

enamel” covering his heart, or perhaps his entire body, suddenly bursts into flame (*moe agaru*).

It is certainly a cryptic work, but before delving into the specifics of its imagery, it is important to consider where the poem eventually ended up: as the frontispiece of Yokota’s first nonfiction book, 1974’s *The Ideology of Killing the Disabled* (*Shōgaisha-goroshi no shisō*), later updated in 1979. This book was written in response to numerous high-profile incidents in the 1970s in Japan of caregivers—especially mothers—killing their young children who had cerebral palsy, and the feeling of rage and helplessness that disabled people felt in the face of a public outpouring of sympathy for those caregivers, whose actions were framed as tragic but inevitable.

At this time Aoi Shiba no Kai and the burgeoning radical feminist movement *ūman ribu* (women’s lib) worked together on a range of issues, most notably uniting against 1972’s Eugenic Protection Law Amendment Bill, which simultaneously aimed to reduce access to abortion and to promote selective abortion of disabled fetuses.³⁰ There were, however, significant conflicts between the two groups. Radical feminist movements worldwide pushed for easy access to safe abortions with few restrictions, while global disability movements pushed back against selective abortion in particular, bringing up fears of eugenics and the disproportionate aborting of fetuses that were likely to have disabilities. Radical feminists argued that their aim was to create a society in which disabled and nondisabled children alike could be raised without discrimination; disability rights activists were skeptical of any approach that did not foreground the specific dangers faced by disabled people in the present and the future. Another point of conflict involved *kogoroshi onna*, women who killed their children; many *ribu* activists repeatedly expressed solidarity with these mothers as part of their overall ideological project of exposing and destroying societal conceptions and policies of gender roles, motherhood, and family as inherently oppressive to women. Tanaka Mitsu, a core member of the *ribu* movement and its most prominent mouthpiece, expressed this succinctly in 1972: “*ribu* and the child-killing women are nothing but two extreme branches coming from the same root.”³¹ This and similar statements, however, elided the fact that a large proportion of children killed this way were killed due to their being disabled.³²

In light of Yokota’s decision to put this poem on the first page of *The Ideology of Killing the Disabled*—seemingly the only poem in the entire book—five years after its first appearance in *Hanashibe*, certain nuances of “Pinwheel” become more apparent. Like in his other poems, Yokota does not describe his own body as disabled, yet his body absorbs “fear” and “longing” from his mother’s eyes, and any surface armor he has burns up in her presence. There is a porosity between their bodies, but also an atmosphere of potential violence, the narrator becoming more and more vulnerable as the poem progresses, with even the flames consuming him being described as “brittle” (*moroi*). Yokota’s favored motifs within his disability poetics return in this poem—alternative modes of feeling and sensation, bodies otherwise, the presence of relatives, natural environments combined with a sense of distance and lack—but here, in the face of several horrific murders of disabled

children, they are used to convey a feeling of threat within the context of a familial tableau. What is also centered here is the intensely fraught and often disturbing role of women within Yokota's work—which often touches on family, caregiving, and birth—with his female figures often serving as little more than stand-ins for the cruelty and violence of the “able-bodied” world.

As mentioned earlier, “Pinwheel” is ostensibly the only poem that appears in Yokota's first nonfiction book, despite his being known first and foremost as a poet. Yet this is not entirely true. At the end of the third section of the first chapter, “The ‘Criminality’ of Mass Media” (“Masukomi no ‘hanzaisei’”), are two pages that look nothing like the rest of the book—indented, loosely and irregularly lineated, with ample blank space:

On a Rainy Street, Wandering through the Nighttime
 A Mother, Following in Suicide Kills Her Beloved Disabled Child
Yomiuri Shimbun

Mother Who Kills Her Paralytic Child
 Suicide “Settlement”
 A Year of Caregiving, Total Exhaustion
 One More “Disabled Children's Home” Tragedy
Mainichi Shimbun

Tragic “Suicide Conclusion”
 Killing Son with Cerebral Palsy Mother Leaps to Death
Tokyo Shimbun

Unidentified Mother Commits Suicide
 Kills Disabled Child
 A Tragic Conclusion Near a Custodial Care School
Kanagawa Shimbun

Mother Strangles Severely Disabled Eldest Son
 Leaps from Building
 Seeking Death
 Body Soaked by Rain Overnight
Sankei Shimbun

Mother Jumps Too Kills Mentally Retarded Child and Leaves Home
Tokyo Shimbun

Jumping to Her Death Near Her Child's School
 The Mother Who Killed Her Disabled Child
*Asahi Shimbun*³³

Yokota highlights the language, often pejorative and cruel, used by the mass media to describe disabled people and their murders by selecting and arranging a series of eight newspaper headlines from February 11, 1978, concerning one of the incidents that became the catalyst for the update and rerelease of his book: a woman in Kanagawa killing her twelve-year-old son who had cerebral palsy, and then leaping to her own death. The victim is alternately described as a “beloved physically disabled child” (*shinshō no aiji*), a “paralytic child” (*mahi no ko*), a “son with cerebral palsy” (*nōsei mahi no musuko*), a “physically disabled child” (*shinshōji*), a “mentally retarded child” (*chie okure no ko*), and a “severely disabled eldest son” (*jūdo shinshō no chōnan*). The overall tone is melodramatic, touching on the mother’s love and exhaustion, the rainy street, and the tragic “conclusion” attained by the act of murder.

Yet beyond the specific language used in these headlines, what is most striking is their *poeticization*. This is most obvious, again, from the visual arrangement of words, which stand out from the rest of the book with creative indentation, lineation, and use of space. Beyond that, the first line contributes to the effect: “On a Rainy Street, Wandering through the Nighttime” (*ame no machi, ichiya sasurai*).³⁴ In other words, it is a phrase of five syllables followed by a phrase of seven syllables, like the first two lines of a haiku or tanka.³⁵ While the rest of the headlines do not follow this pattern, Yokota’s decision to put this particular quotation first, along with the formatting, serves as a subtle signal to the reader to read this sequence as *lyric*.

What is the effect of this decision? Jahan Ramazani points out a consistent trope of positioning poetry as an “antigenre to the news,” held up for its resistance to the urgent pressure of immediacy and simplification inherent to journalism.³⁶ Nevertheless, he says, poetry across the globe in the twentieth century has consistently incorporated the news while still defining itself against it dialogically.³⁷ In a way akin to this, Yokota uses the language of journalism against itself by taking headlines and arranging them in a sequence and in a way to make them look “poetic.” He thus asks the reader, even if subconsciously, to read these headlines—ubiquitous, designed to be graspable and to convey information in an instant—as a poem. In other words, he asks us to read them *intensively* instead of *extensively*—carefully, with a heightened attention to the choice of words used by mainstream society to describe disability as a tragedy, and the murder of a disabled child as an understandable and inevitable conclusion. Again, in Yokota’s disability poetics there is a consistent spotlight on the cultural formation of disability and the power imbalance inherent to the act of deeming something or someone disabled. This poem-that-is-not-a-poem gains force precisely due to its being a poem across media, in this case mass media. The journalistic depictions that were the main source of both the information about and the framing of these incidents for the vast majority of people become, in Yokota’s act of poeticization, removed from a context in which they can purport to be a neutral and objective account of events, the ideology behind their language made apparent.

The final Yokota poem that I wish to consider is “Thoughts on a Hot Night” (“*Atsui yoru no omoi*”), which touches upon each of the motifs and particularities of his disability poetics explored earlier.

now
 one feeling
 flows through my heart
 it is the feeling of a dark sea
 it is the feeling of the pupils of dead children floating on that sea

the world which must have inhaled the august heat and turned clear
 at some point became a purified landscape, towering around me
 with limbs that have nothing but uncertain thoughts
 announcing the secret yet grim fact of the advent of its weathering away

I must consider
 the reason that I am me
 I must consider
 the reason for the existence of a person who has limbs that announced their
 weathering away
 the reason for the fact of the existence of limbs that have nothing but
 uncertain thoughts

I must consider
 I must keep considering
 that feelings are nothing but feelings

now
 there flows within my heart
 one feeling
 it is the feeling of a dark sea

ripping through the thoughts of a hot night
 the work of the birth of a golden beast
 is conveying like an arrow
 a definite whistling sound but³⁸

In the wake of the number of high-profile cases of children with cerebral palsy murdered in 1972, the year this work was first published, Yokota grapples with a nebulous “feeling” (*jōnetsu*) in his heart, the feeling of a “dark sea” (*kurai umi*), a recurring motif in his work (most prominently in but not limited to “Deep-Sea Fish”). In this poem he represents his body as “otherwise” in a way much that is more direct than usual for him. He questions the value of his own existence as a person whose limbs “announced their weathering away” (*teashi ni fūka o tsugeta*) and that “have nothing but uncertain thoughts” (*futashika-na shisō shika motenai*). His cerebral palsy is thus depicted through a portrayal of a kind of embodied cognition, where his limbs themselves think but are as “uncertain” as he himself feels.

Like “Legs,” which is addressed both on the page and in person to a nondisabled audience, “Thoughts on a Hot Night” also engages in what Arai calls a poetics of accusation (*kokuhatsu no shigaku*), which he locates specifically in the “pupils of dead children” (*shiji no hitomi*).³⁹ In this reading, the spirits of these children are the accusers, implicitly denouncing a society that would allow for their deaths, but also Yokota himself as inextricable from that society. Another striking feature of this poem is its repetitive, obsessive structure befitting the title, resembling cyclical thoughts during a bout of insomnia; Yokota’s body, wracked with heat and guilt and involuntary movement, creates a poem that does the same. It is this connection of the poet’s body and the form of the text, even if lightly drawn, that I wish to consider at the conclusion of this chapter; let us briefly return, then, to *Shinonome* magazine.

THE EXPERIMENTATION OF THE DISABLED BODY

Looking through issues of *Shinonome*, it is hard not to be struck by its visuality. The earliest issues, as mentioned before, were handwritten, highlighting the idiosyncratic movements of a body with cerebral palsy through the materiality of writing. Yet in *Shinonome*’s printed era, its cover art becomes particularly striking. Starting in the early 1970s, the majority of its covers featured a particular type of illustration, such as the one from the eightieth issue (see figure 9).

From a distance, *Shinonome*’s cover illustrations look like they’ve been drawn by hand, perhaps with an unusual printing technique. The subjects range from flowers to a man in uniform, from a building to a snowman to a monkey. Yet a closer look reveals that the images have been created using a typewriter, everything composed of typographic symbols. In the case of this uncredited cover, a flower is made out of the hiragana letters あさがお, spelling “morning glory” (*asagao*); the leaves are made of the syllable “ha” は, which means “leaf” (figure 9).

In this era of *Shinonome*, each issue is filled with advertisements for Japanese-language electric typewriters, often with modifications like specialized key layouts or guide plates for those with motor disabilities, who of course made up the majority of the journal’s audience. The ad copy, however, was usually aimed at a teacher or caregiver who would set up the machine, and not at disabled users themselves. Furthermore, none of these companies seemed to have been aware of the potential usefulness of their product as tool of art making accessible to a wide variety of bodies, making this a use of the technology not intended by its creators. One might say that the choice of these *Shinonome* artists to create typewriter art in this way was out of necessity; many people with cerebral palsy find it difficult to draw or write with a pencil, pen, or brush by hand, especially if precision is required.



FIGURE 9. Detail of the typewritten morning glory adorning a portion of the cover of the journal *Shinonome*'s eightieth issue, January 1975.

But this would not do justice to what is most interesting here—or, even worse, it might fall into the overused trope in which disabled people are represented as inspirational figures who create art despite their hardships. What is highlighted by these cover images is an *art otherwise*, spectacularizing the fact that it was created by a *body otherwise* by means of its experimental use of the media technology of the electric typewriter. Not only that, these artists' typeset flowers, figures, and landscapes veer firmly into the realm of the poetic, emerging at the confluence of visual art, writing technology, and text.

The commonplace notion of printed text hiding the specificity of a body—privileging the capacity of handwriting and calligraphy as a record or an index of a particular body’s act of creation—is challenged here. *Shinonome* centered the act of unconventional bodies writing not just through its text art covers, but also with regular articles and special issues on themes like “the electric typewriter” in which poets with cerebral palsy reflected on the act of using novel writing technologies, sometimes entirely written in the kana syllabaries to show that they were direct transcriptions of the typewritten output. These articles and the typed poetic cover artworks are self-consciously performative engagements between diverse bodies and new media technologies. They reveal the potential of these technologies to be rethought and used in ways distinct from their original intended uses. While the mimeographs of unconventional handwriting that made up the earliest issues of *Shinonome* showed the presence of disabled bodies in their creation more explicitly, those bodies are no less present in the authorship of these (or any) typeset works: the technology itself is made visible in specific ways that do not let it remain body-agnostic.

Yokota, as well as the many other poets within Japan’s disability movements, took up disability and the lives of disabled people not just in their poems’ content, but also in their striving to think of poems themselves otherwise. In Yokota’s case, this took the form of his highly personal and specific use of imagery, unusual poetic sources like patient charts and headlines, and his dedication to making his disabled body visible in performance and articulation. While not as ostentatious as some other works of poetry and art usually considered to be part of Japan’s avant-garde, the *Shinonome* cover artists’ careful overlap of typewritten symbols to create gradients, color fields, solid blocks of ink, cross-hatching, and so on evoked the experimental concrete poems that grew in popularity in Japan and across the world in the postwar era, created by poets like Niikuni Seiichi, who usually used phototypesetters to change the size, shape, and orientation of each character.⁴⁰ The *Shinonome* poets’ work was no less innovative than the much-heralded experimental art of Japan’s 1950s and 1960s that was featured in the previous chapter, but its innovation firmly centered on the day-to-day lived experiences of disabled people, and on those with cerebral palsy in particular. They aimed not to reduce disability to a metaphor, as is so often the case, but to consistently challenge the *body of the poem* in a way that refuses to take it as a given, much like the disability movements of this time refused to accept a “norm” that only allowed certain bodies within it.⁴¹

Consider once more Yokota, sitting on the ground outside Shinjuku station, writing in chalk and reciting his poem out loud. In the scene of *Good-bye CP* that precedes this, we hear a conversation between the director, Hara Kazuo, and Yokota; Hara points out to him that Yokota once said that people don’t understand what he says, and Hara wonders how that will work in the poetry reading. “I think they will understand something,” says Yokota.

“Even if they don’t understand every single word . . . if they’re really listening, they’ll understand.”⁴²

His speech is, indeed, difficult to understand entirely. A review of the film from the time by the critic Satō Shigechika notes the film’s “largely unintelligible dialogue.”⁴³ This is because the Japanese release of the film did not have any subtitles to aid the audience in understanding the words of the subjects with cerebral palsy (though transcripts were distributed in programs for people to read later). “If the protagonists of the film had not been Japanese, there’s no question that I would have added subtitles,” said Hara in a later essay.⁴⁴

I also might have used subtitles if they had been from far-off areas with strong regional accents—for example, if people living in Tokyo would have had a hard time understanding their local dialect. But the difficulty an audience is confronted with when people with cerebral palsy talk doesn’t have to do with dialect. I think an audience has to become accustomed to how people with cerebral palsy speak. That is, if the audience gets used to this, if they spend some time with them, they’ll come to understand them.⁴⁵

Indeed, Hara says that although most of the crowd remained silent, audience members with cerebral palsy laughed and reacted throughout: they were able to understand all the dialogue.⁴⁶ In the Takasugi Shingo article about *Goodbye CP* published earlier, however, Hara claimed that “none of the people that were crowded around recognized what Yokota was saying in his squeezed-out voice as a poem.”⁴⁷ Even disregarding the fact that Yokota wrote “Yokota Hiroshi Poem” on the ground in front of him before the reading, this is a pessimistic view, and one that reduces the multifaceted encounter between poet, voice, body, audience, and poem solely to a question of intelligibility.

Whether or not the audience around Yokota or of *Goodbye CP* could understand the words of his poem at first is a debate that itself highlights the other yet no less important elements of the poetic encounter recorded in this scene. Yokota’s performance of “Legs” is also a performance of a poem across media, of a body otherwise, of writing otherwise, of speaking otherwise, and—on the part of the audience of both the reading and the film—of listening otherwise, of attempting to come to a different kind of understanding. This process can never be perfect, but in itself it continually articulates different modes of sensation and relation to others. “Disability is a word cut in the landscape of bodies,” says Petra Kupperts. “Experimental poetry is not only stuff that is unintelligible on the page. It is also poems that become unintelligible as they are performed, as their familiar words enter a machine that sticks and shudders with aching gears.”⁴⁸ While many of Yokota’s poems might not fit what is conventionally thought of as avant-garde or experimental, by centering their disability poetics, he and the other poets of Japan’s disability movements achieved experimentality through other means: by handwriting their poems on pages or pavement in a way that made visible the

unconventional movements made by their hands; by reading their poems aloud, even or especially when their voices were not easily understandable to those outside their communities; and by rethinking how embodiment can be expressed through language when their own bodies were made invisible or deemed expendable. Put another way, through these poems, bodies otherwise, though forbidden to walk, were able to speak—and what's more, to make speaking new.