

## **Note to an old friend**

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke

Translated by Connor Mayer

<https://sites.socsci.uci.edu/~cjmayer/>

### **Note from the translator**

This is an English translation of the suicide note of Japanese author Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927). I did this translation in 2009 while I was an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia as my final project in JAPN 408: Readings in Modern Japanese Literature. I chose this project because I liked Akutagawa and wanted to better understand his death, and because, at least at that point, there was no decent English translation on the internet.

I recently (in 2024) noticed that an Internet Archive copy of my translation was referenced on [the Wikipedia](#) page for this note. Since someone has apparently found it useful, I decided to blow the dust off it and put it on my website in a more permanent capacity.

Although I ended up going on to become an academic, I do not study Japanese literature, nor am I a translator. This translation came at the peak of my rather modest Japanese abilities, and although I see many clear shortcomings in it, I am in no place to revisit it now. As such, I want to stress that this is purely an amateur effort and will probably remain that way. I hope, despite that, you find it useful and enjoyable (at least to the extent that this kind of note can be enjoyed).

### **Translation**

No one has yet written candidly of the mental state of one who is to commit suicide. This may be due to the self-respect of the suicide victim, or perhaps a lack of psychological interest in his own state of mind. In this, my final letter to you, I will endeavour to make clear my mental state. But even if I should fail to convey my motives to you accurately, I will still be satisfied in the attempt. In one of his short stories, Régnier depicts a man who commits suicide, but does not himself understand for what reason. You can find many motivations for suicide in the police section of the newspaper, from fiscal hardship or ill health to mental anguish. In my experience these do not represent the totality of motives, but only speak of the journey towards the true reason. Those who commit suicide are for the most part as Régnier depicted, unaware of their real motivation. Suicide, as with all our actions, involves a complexity of motives. In my case, I am driven by, at the very least, a vague sense of unease: some indistinct sense of unease towards my future. It is possible that you will not be able to take me at my word. Ten years of experience have taught me that for those who are not my close and constant acquaintances, my words dissipate like a song in the wind. So I would not blame you...

For the past two years I have thought incessantly of death. It was also during this period that I read Mainländer, whose work has become deeply ingrained in my consciousness. I am certain that Mainländer quite ingeniously depicts the journey towards death, couched in abstract words. I want to depict the same in a more concrete form. I have no greater desire than this, not even

sympathy to my family. This might seem to you nothing less than “inhuman,” but if you deem me inhuman, know that I am only superficially so.

I am duty bound to write all this honestly (I feel that I have already made every effort to examine my vague sense of unease towards my future in “A Fool’s Life.” In it, I deliberately chose not to write about a certain social factor whose shadow still hangs over me – the feudal era. This is because we humans are even today living in its shadow to some extent. I tried to write only of the scenery, lighting, and actors – for the most part my own acting – that appeared on other stages than that one. Besides, I could not but entertain doubts as to whether I myself could clearly understand this social condition while living in the midst of it). My primary concern was how to die in such a way as to minimize suffering. Hanging is, of course, the most appropriate method for this purpose. But when I lingered on the image of my own dangling form, I was overcome by a lavish feeling of aesthetic disgust (I remember a time when I loved a certain woman, but lost my feelings towards her when I found her to be a poor writer). Drowning, too, could in no way achieve my goal, as I am an able swimmer. Even in the unlikely event that I succeeded, it would prove more painful than hanging. The thought of throwing myself beneath a train evoked in me more than anything that sense of aesthetic revulsion. Death by a pistol or a knife held the potential for failure due to the trembling of my hands. Leaping from a building would no doubt be unsightly. Based on these considerations, I settled upon death brought on by a drug. It is possible that death by a drug may be more painful than hanging. However, aside from the fact that I find it less abhorrent than hanging, it also holds the benefit that there is no danger of resuscitation. There only remained the issue that procuring such a drug would be, needless to say, no simple task for me. I set myself upon suicide, and resolved to use every means at my disposal to acquire the drug. At the same time, I tried to gain what knowledge I could of toxicology.

My thoughts then turned to where I would take my life. My family would have to rely on my inheritance after my death: a meagre property that would amount to only one hundred tsubo of land, my house, the rights to my work, and my savings of two thousand yen. I was anxious about my house becoming unmarketable because of my suicide, and accordingly felt a sense of envy towards the bourgeois who had even a single country house. You might find my saying such a thing quite ridiculous. But when thinking of these matters, one in reality feels a deep sense of awkwardness. It is an unavoidable awkwardness. I wanted to make every effort to kill myself in such a way that no one outside my family would see my corpse.

Even after I had settled on the means, however, I found I still clung to life in some limited way. Accordingly, I needed a springboard to propel me into death (I do not believe as the westerners do that suicide is a sin. In the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha affirms the suicide of one of his disciples. Some who distort the truth to cater to public sentiment might say that this applies only in circumstances where such assent is “unavoidable.” But seen from another perspective, these “unavoidable” circumstances are not just the extreme cases where one would inevitably die a more miserable death. Anyone who chooses to take their own life does so as a result of circumstances which are, to them, “unavoidable.” If anything, those who do it before that point must have an abundance of courage). When all is said and done, it is typically a woman who fills the role of this springboard. Kleist, prior to taking his own life, solicited his friends to become his companions. Racine also tried to cast himself into the river Seine together with Molière and Boileau. Unfortunately, I have no such friends as these, so I merely tried to convince a woman

with whom I was acquainted to die by my side. This, however, turned out to be a proposal she could not undertake for my sake, and I soon became confident that I could take my life without a springboard. This did not come about from despair that no one wished to die with me; rather, I was becoming increasingly sentimental, and even if my wife would be bereaved of me in death, I wanted to be considerate towards her. At the same time, I knew that killing myself would be simpler without an accomplice. What's more, there was doubtlessly a convenience in being able to take my life at the time of my choosing.

My final device was to end my life in such a way that my family would not notice before the deed was done. After several months of preparation, I attained a certain confidence that I would be able to do so (I cannot write these details here for the sake of those people who care about me. But even if I did write it here, it is certain that no charge as ludicrous as "aiding and abetting suicide" would ever be created under our law. If this law were applied, how the number of criminals would increase! Even if the pharmacies, gun shops, and razor sellers claimed that they did not know, as long as our words and expressions betray our true intentions they would receive some measure of suspicion. Besides, society and the law and such have themselves necessitated this aiding and abetting of suicide. In the end what kind hearts most of these criminals would have!). I carried out these preparations calmly, and now merely entertain myself with the thought of death. My mood before it is for the most part as Mainländer wrote.

We are human animals and thus fear death as animals do. The so-called "will to live" is nothing more than a different name for animal instinct. I am but one of these human animals, and when I observe my loss of interest in food and women, I realize I have gradually lost this animal instinct. Now I reside in a world of diseased nerves, as translucent as ice. Last night I spoke with a prostitute about her wages (!) and felt deeply the pathos of we humans who "live for the sake of living." If we can submit ourselves to that eternal slumber, we can doubtlessly win ourselves peace, if perhaps not happiness, but I had doubts as to when I would be brave enough to take my life. In this state, nature has only become more beautiful than ever to me. You love the beauty of nature, and would no doubt scoff at my contradictions. But nature is beautiful precisely because it falls upon eyes that will not appreciate it for much longer. I have seen, loved, and understood more than others. This alone grants me some measure of solace in the midst of insurmountable sorrows. Please keep this letter from being made public for several years after my death. It is possible that I may take my life in a way that appears to be a natural death.

PS. Reading the life of Empedocles, I realized what an ancient desire it is to make oneself a god. As far as I can tell, this letter does not attempt that. No, I exist only as a mundane human being. Perhaps you recall twenty years ago when we discussed "Empedocles on Etna" under the linden trees. At that time, I was one who fancied himself a god.