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Julia M. Chin
Gettysburg College

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Haruka's World

Author Bio

Julia Chin is a junior English with a Writing Concentration and East Asian Studies - Japan double major, as well as a Music minor. She spent her autumn semester studying literature in Bath, England and continued her studies, alongside the occasional haiku or origami animal, at Kansai Gaidai University in Japan this spring. She is in love with words.

Haruka's World

JULIA M. CHIN

This is the train of death by silence. Among these crackling, vinyl seats, it is impossible to tell whether a single passenger breathes. Pale faces are illuminated in the grey afternoon by LED screens of phones, tablets, and other electronic demons. Their mouths stay shut; their eyes don't meet.

The air in Japan is heavy with rain, and Haruka wonders how her parasol has made it to this final chapter of summer. The umbrella is the same black-blue as her pleated skirt and leans precariously against her wool stockings. It was a gift two months prior, when Haruka graduated primary level, but the pink lace edging has grown pale and sullied over the rainy season, the waterproof canopy covered with fading lines of water like tear streaks. Today, the rain continues on, creating a droning harmony with the steady rattle of train tracks. Haruka surreptitiously glances at the mess her dripping umbrella's made before returning her attention to her electronic. Liquid sadness and summer pool together on the train's moving floor like an homage to the girl, and the 15:43 Nippon Express rolls on towards Kobe.

It is so quiet; it is the quiet that swallowed her grief and ate the air at Takeshi's funeral, Haruka decides. When she was a child, she never knew the world could be so still. Now thirteen, she knows better; she knows to let her breath in and out slowly and walk with the calculated tread of a night thief. She knows not to make a sound. Still, the monstrous quiet makes her want to scream.

The sudden, metallic peal of a knell sends Haruka time-traveling. It first takes her into the rain, on the river bank, standing on a bit of swollen Earth with no body beneath it. A small grey stone marks an empty grave for her brother. Bronze bells, Shinto rites of death, and nothing but the quiet everywhere. Quiet, quiet, quiet. It comes down in sheets with the rain, but Haruka has no lace parasol to protect from that mind-numbing cold. However, the thought of rain jerks Haruka into the present, back to the indifferent downpour against the train's windows. The metallic clang of the bells is gone.

Haruka stares in horror at her silver lunch box, incidentally knocked to the floor by a sharp turn around the tracks. The clattering sound must have been instantaneous and gone in a moment—but

then why does she still feel it in her bones? It is the first utterance to have broken the silent death since the train left the station; however, Haruka makes no moves to right the battered box of tin. She simply lets it lie and slowly, ever so slowly, looks up from her electronic to address the silence boring into her skull. No heads turn to accuse her minor though catastrophic disturbance, yet Haruka almost wishes they would. And, in that silence, Haruka hears angels. This one, though, seems to have fallen to the ranks of demons from the way it comes, rasping and clinging to the compartment's support poles like lifelines. Haruka hears the cry for help. She immediately wishes she hadn't.

The monstrosity splits the rotting silence with his sharp tongue, ranting and raving like those unlucky few who survived the Black Rain. It is dressed in dark denim and a muddied sweatshirt featuring a cartoon character from years before Japan's childhood was terminated. His eyes are glazed over with weight that hangs down into large bags beneath them, and in perceiving the color, Haruka realizes that the thing is human.

In a way, the boy reminds her of her brother. Haruka remembers Takeshi donning a suit for coming-of-age day just before the war took him, and this boy likewise looks about twenty. And though it is the uncanny resemblance of those ethereal hazel irises that makes Haruka even look twice at the boy, the similarity ends here. Where Takeshi's eyes were sharp and cold, this boy's are pudgy and dull. Haruka doesn't need to waste an entire glance on him to know he is damaged. Why or how doesn't really matter. All that matters now is the screaming, as he wildly implores the train car passengers for an incomprehensible something, swaying like a drunkard through otherwise dense silence. Not one of the passengers moves or acknowledges any existence of the boy's suffering. Haruka shoves down that guilty desire for speech and returns to her electronic.

Three gold stars shining on the screen announce that she's levelled up in the adventure world: another creature has been added to her arsenal. A graphic of an attractive woman wearing a surgical mask pops up, and Haruka immediately recognizes the collective nightmare of her fifth-year class: Kuchisake Onna. When words were spoken and not just typed along grimy pads of electronics, Haruka's mother had told her bedtime stories of the slit-mouthed woman. How the beautiful lady wearing the face mask asks children on the street if she's pretty. How 'no' receives violent death by repeated plunging of scissors into the unlucky child's gasping lungs. How 'yes' is greeted by a reveal of that infamous mouth, grinning flesh slit from ear to ear, the mere sight killing you on the pavement. How no matter what you

say or do, there is no right answer. Haruka has never stopped to talk to anyone on her 27-minute walk home from the station since. Not even the time that she got lost in the rain with her then clean umbrella and tin lunch box.

Even constrained within the electronic's plastic frame, Kuchisake Onna haunts Haruka in the silence on the train. Haruka thinks all the passengers are secretly slit-mouthed men and women.

Perhaps no one speaks because they are afraid of the things they'll say. Or maybe they are afraid of one another. The fear of silver blades and ripped flesh grinning between anyone's calm and immovable exterior. A young girl of only thirteen, Haruka does not use such large words in her mental digression, but the scary thoughts are scary just the same.

Security within the traincar is found in grabbing onto germ-ridden, metallic poles and plastic circles suspended from the ceiling by thick, fabric straps. Haruka is surprised no has used the latter as a noose yet. But maybe news of such a feat has not yet reached her: the disintegration of word-of-mouth has made travel much slower. It's hard to believe that it's been nearly seven years since Haruka last heard another human voice. It has been three since she heard her own.

"Haruka."

A voice seething with pain and betrayal worms its way into her ear, and Haruka's neck snaps up, her baby-blue earbuds ripped from their resting places. The monster of a boy on the train is closer now, approaching as if drawn to her. The swollen hazel eyes flash like caged dragons. They beseech every bystander without words: Help me. Save me. Kill me. The boy's guttural rasping continues, but Haruka's name never falls from his spitting lips.

Haruka risks a glance at other passengers, but they remain inert bodies. The populus of Japan is silent as the dead. The only sign of life comes from the occasional blink of eyes otherwise glued to electronics; artificial light from screens color their faces in a harsh rainbow. Haruka feels herself entranced and disturbed. She worries that she hasn't noticed this sooner only to realize that she's never looked up before. The part of her that is still a child and inherently good suddenly realizes that something is very, very wrong. The part of her that has been raised under the silent blanket of this world does not allow her to realize what.

A soft, crackling hiss comes near her knee, and Haruka restores the fallen earbuds above tiny gold studs. "Haruka," the pained voice entreats again, and she looks down at the slit-mouthed woman

crooning the syllables inside her electronic game. Haruka blinks. She'd forgotten what her name sounded like.

Another unintelligible shriek pierces the train's compartment, and Haruka lets her copper bangs hide her bewildered eyes while turning the game's background music louder. Only one other passenger wears headphones; the rest are rendered deaf by will and conquered ignorance. None see nor hear the dying boy before them. If they are the perfect citizens of this post-H Day world, they do not even think of him. Their brains do not register any electrical signals, though they whisper with little zaps of nerves to notice death at hand. No synapses fire, no moves are made, and the boy is still dying.

Haruka remembers the last time she felt death. Everywhere, just like now. However, no one talks about the bombing to such a degree that no one speaks at all. Foreign infiltration, Takeshi told his sister, polluting Japan's skies with an excess of hydrogen and dumping black into the air that pours down onto innocents, Haruka. Melting their skin to tatters and electrifying their bones to dust. The skies filled with red, white, and blue.

Maybe Takeshi talked too much; maybe that's why he died. Haruka had only been speaking for two years when Port City H was blown to bits during that infamous August. Yet, Japan would always remember, and so would her children, as the air became live with chemicals and the babies born wrong. In those times, the 'Land of the Sun' couldn't even see that bright orb, blotted out by shadows and hatred. Takeshi wasn't near H during the nuclear explosion—Haruka remembered this from his letters addressed from his private plane—but that was the last she heard of him. The mailbox went silent, not one of Takeshi's letters ever to arrive again. Haruka's parents didn't say anything, they simply took her to the empty grave that rainy morning, where the harsh mourning bells spoke volumes. After that, they gave up speaking altogether, and Haruka's world went mute.

Without Takeshi, Haruka began to see for herself in the silence, as paranoia took residence at their dinner table. Scarred flesh did not heal, and broken hearts did not forget. It became an unspoken rule to revert to the time before H Day and the war, a time when Japan was blissfully isolated. Yet, Haruka's world became not only isolated from the outside one but also isolated within itself. Allegiances and vulnerability were dangerous. Trust had been betrayed, and so humanity became a synonym for weakness. Haruka's mother stopped reading her bedtime stories, then stopped speaking, and eventually, stopped looking at her. She gave her precocious daughter an electronic with the new regime's rigorous method of "home-schooling" pre-installed

and left her to her devices.

Intensely focused on that loathsome electronic now, Haruka misses the friends she had before the schools shut down. She misses the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches they ate before the embargo on foreign trade put an embargo on her favorite Calligraphy Club snack. She misses her native word for “love” and the way it felt on her tongue before her brother disappeared and the land went mum. Love could be betrayed: Haruka felt it. “Trust” became only a myth whispered on the wind of kamikaze planes.

The very word makes Haruka shudder behind closed eyelids repressing tears. Kamikaze. It is soon followed by an even uglier and painful sound: Takeshi. Haruka wonders if everyone else is fighting for words within themselves the same way she is.

“HYAAAAA.” The nonsensical scream breaks her meditation, and Haruka alone seems to hear the boy’s pain. She wonders if her electronic’s volume control is broken. She feels like she’s going deaf like all the others, but she can’t blast the gaming music any louder.

“Rrrr...r...ru..rr—,” the boy stutters, foaming at the mouth now and gesturing wildly. Haruka witnesses his madness through peripheral vision. Her electronic game announces that she’s reached the next level. “Welcome,” Kuchisake Onna hisses.

“AAAAAAAAAH!” Haruka drops her electronic with a gasp and watches the boy fall. His neck lashes backward unnaturally, and he throws himself onto the floor with a resounding thud from his skull. Haruka’s sharp inhalation is the only sound heard on the dead silent train.

Haruka’s cherry mouth remains agape, and she is paralyzed until the train doors open and its occupants flood out, robotically stepping over the mess. After a momentary lapse, Haruka too stands before the spreading blood can reach her white Nikes. Pausing to retrieve her fallen electronic, she notices the name written on the tag sticking out of the prostrate boy’s hoodie. Only the first two characters are visible: Ta. Ke.

“No,” Haruka says aloud before clamping a hand across her mouth as if to swallow the sound. She shoves her electronic into her pocket, but not before catching her reflection in the dark, shattered glass. Eyes of uncanny hazel stare back at her.

The boy on the train may die, but they all die every day. Haruka reflects on this truth as she runs home under a blood-stained parasol through heavy downpour. A world of people already dead continue past her, as though death itself were merely a dream too disturbing to waste a glance upon.