

# SIGNING THE UNSPEAKABLE: ON TRAUMA, RECOVERY, AND *DRIVE MY CAR*

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**T**he world as I know it has dissolved.

“All trauma is preverbal,” writes Bessel van der Kolk (43). In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, he examines current scientific knowledge about the nature of PTSD and catalogues possible treatments for the disorder. “Victims of assaults and accidents sit mute and frozen in emergency rooms . . . photographs of combat soldiers show hollow-eyed men staring mutely into a void” (43). In 1994, van der Kolk and a team of researchers identified the neural substrate of this phenomenon: when patients were dissociating, Broca’s area—a portion of the brain that is necessary for generating language—was deactivated (43). Trauma, from this perspective, is a neurochemical response, not an external event, and the response is one of dissociation—what van der Kolk terms “the essence of trauma” (66). Some who experience potentially traumatic events don’t dissociate at all; others dissociate so severely that their memory of the event is obliterated along with the language they could use to describe it (192).

*I clutch at words that crumble as I struggle to scramble out of this preverbal void.*

Traumatized people fall silent for many reasons: some are rendered speechless during flashbacks; others become frustrated when they find that their speech is consistently disorganized (van der Kolk 43). Maya Angelou, famously, resigned herself to “muteness” (88). In her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she recounts that after her testimony against the man who raped her when she was a child led to his murder, she felt that her voice was too dangerous to be heard: “I had to stop talking” (87).

It is unsurprising, then, that in a film about the lead-up to and aftermath of a traumatic event, a non-speaking person should serve as the spiritual anchor. Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* tells the story of Yusuke Kafuku, an actor and director whose love for his wife Oto is matched only by his dedication to his red Saab 900. Oto, a screenwriter, dies suddenly after learning that Yusuke has discovered her affair with Koji Takatsuki, the young star of one of her films. In the wake of his wife’s death, Yusuke, who is starring in his own production of *Waiting for Godot*, finds himself speechless and unable to proceed with the performance. However, despite losing his ability to act, he keeps directing, and two years later he finds himself in Hiroshima staging a multilingual production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*. A phlegmatic perfectionist, he proceeds as methodically as ever: he travels from the island where he is lodged to Hiroshima each day in his precious Saab, reading lines from the play along with a tape his wife recorded for him. But instead of playing Vanya himself, he casts

the brash and impulsive Takatsuki in the role. The evolution of their relationship, and Yusuke's burgeoning friendship with Misaki, the driver that he is forced to accept for liability reasons—someone who, it is revealed, has suffered significant losses herself—are the focus of the remainder of the film.

Against this backdrop, the character Yoon-a, a non-speaking former dancer who turned to acting after being traumatized by a miscarriage, can seem extraneous. A cursory *Rotten Tomatoes* search reveals that only five out of forty-five top critics used the keywords “Yoon-a” or “sign language” in their review, and most of the few that did portrayed the use of the language as one of the film's many idiosyncrasies. Worse yet, because she is a “mute” character played by a speaking actor, Yoon-a could be construed as merely a metaphor for silence, trauma, and exclusion. However, a closer examination of her silences, and of the contradictory nature of silence itself, reveals that her role in the film is more than symbolic: her character arc traces the full path to recovery from trauma, a path on which her inability to speak is revealed to be an asset in disguise.

In the United States, speech is often associated with agency, personhood, and connection. Silence, as the absence of speech, is equated with powerlessness and disconnection. As prominent feminist Rebecca Solnit succinctly puts it, “words bring us together, and silence separates us” (18). In her essay “A Short History of Silence,” she reflects on the role that silence has played in the ongoing struggle for women's rights and concludes that it is inextricably bound up with oppression. Because their cries for help have not been heard, she laments, people who have been abused and subjugated stop talking, stop listening, and ultimately “hear no one, not even themselves . . . [they] have repressed, forgotten, buried the knowledge and thereby buried themselves” (Solnit 38).

*I am left alone with only an echo of myself. The voices of others arrive as a sub-marine mumbling, as if resonating through the plexiglass barriers of an aquarium tank.*

When oppression is presented as the only alternative, it seems reasonable and even admirable to demand speech. That is precisely what “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde did in her address “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (“Audre Lorde”). Following a surgery that could have marked the beginning of the end of her life, she implored her listeners to tell their stories: “In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my own mortality . . . what I regretted most were my silences . . . I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared” (Lorde 41).

This urgent need to speak spurs many traumatized people to assume what Delker et al. call a “survivor identity” (4). In their analysis of social perceptions of trauma in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, they identified three types of endings to trauma stories: negative, redemptive, and survivor identity. Survivors, in a modern American context, are those who tell their stories even and especially in the face of scorn and disbelief. In yet another example of speech as a form of connection, their

choice to do so is often motivated by their desire to serve others who have endured similar traumas (Delker et al. 4). As Solnit observes, “speaking up is . . . often an act of empathy” (38).

But telling difficult stories is more than just a service we provide to others. Rather, it is regarded as both the catalyst for and the proof of healing. Our cultural preference for people who speak, and speak with conviction, entices us into believing that despite the ineffability of trauma, verbalizing one’s feelings about traumatic events should lead to healing and reintegration. This belief, for which there is compelling but incomplete evidence, undergirds all traditional treatments for the disorder. The oldest and most famous of these treatments, of course, is psychotherapy, invented by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (van der Kolk 183). Talk therapy was invented when these two pioneers realized that recollecting the details of a traumatic event could relieve their patients’ “hysterical symptoms” (183).

*Hand around throat, head against concrete, my roommate Simón spits poppy flowers that sprout crimson as they spatter my white clothes. . .*

Undoubtedly, it is necessary to recall the specifics of a traumatic event in order to determine its lingering effects. But where does this leave Yoon-a? There has been no room for her in the conversation about *Drive My Car* up to this point. Even if she signs her story, she will usually need someone to translate and speak for her. Won’t the immediacy, and therefore the transformative power of telling, be lost?

The answer is a resounding no. We first hear Yoon-a’s backstory during a scene in which she and her husband Gong Yoon-soo, the dramaturg for the production of *Uncle Vanya*, host Yusuke and Misaki for dinner to apologize for the fact that they had concealed their marriage when she auditioned. Dressed in white, Yoon-a is initially presented as a symbol of fertility. The potatoes on the table, Yoon-soo is proud to note, were grown by her, and Yoon-a even jokes that one of the potatoes looks like him (1:22:45-1:23:05). But soon, the illusion is shattered: when Yusuke asks why she auditioned, she responds with a series of signs that concludes when she brings both hands before her womb, pushes one down and away, and solemnly bows her head. Her husband, after declining to translate her last sentence, reluctantly translates this one: “I got pregnant and took time off from dancing, but had a miscarriage.” She confesses that she turned to acting because her body “refused to dance.” Finally, she relaxes, and she joyfully shares that acting is bringing life to her body again. Her guests sit spellbound, clearly moved that someone could share such a story so forthrightly (1:25:05 – 1:27:53).

But Yusuke and Misaki also share their stories, and until those two stoic characters finally show emotion during the film’s closing scenes, they’re not transformed in the process. On the contrary, they seem to be stuck in cycles of repetition and self-hatred: Yusuke listens to his dead wife’s voice repeat the same lines in the same car on the same roads every single day; Misaki, in search of a way to escape the literal and

figurative wreckage of her personal life, flees to Hiroshima, of all places. The more they try to leave their pasts behind, the more their pasts define them.

*I run, insensate, through the vibrating danger of boarded-up districts. Fear brings me back to life; adrenaline outraces memory.*

“Freud,” writes Van der Kolk,

had a term for such traumatic reenactments: “the compulsion to repeat.” He and many of his followers believed that reenactments were an unconscious attempt to get control over a painful situation and that they eventually could lead to mastery and resolution. There is no evidence for that theory—repetition leads only to further pain and self-hatred. In fact, even reliving the trauma repeatedly in therapy may reinforce preoccupation and fixation (32).

Neuroscientist Ethan Kross captures this “preoccupation and fixation” in a single word: *Chatter*. In his 2021 book of the same name, he discusses some ways in which our thought patterns hold us in thrall and offers evidence-based strategies to help readers use their inner voices to their advantage. One of the findings he discovers most consistently in the scientific literature is that, paradoxically, repeatedly sharing negative experiences with others can actually intensify feelings of isolation (Kross 31).

Why, then, is Yoon-a’s story so transformative—not just for her, but for Yusuke and Misaki as well? One clue can be found in the nature of sign language itself: unlike speech, it demands full-body awareness and communication.

*Breathing in, I know I’m breathing in ... Breathing out, I know I’m breathing out.*

A fascination with the physicality of sign language led anthropologist Stephen C. Fedorowicz to a series of workshops at the Japanese Sign Language (JSL) Atelier in Hirakata. Knowing that deaf children in Japan were often forced to learn to speak by hearing teachers rather than taught sign language by Deaf ones, Fedorowicz was curious about the role that JSL played in initiating deaf people—that is, people who are clinically deaf—into the Deaf cultural community. The result was his 2019 paper “Performance, Sign Language, and Deaf Identity in Japan,” in which he argued that the performative aspect of sign language played a crucial role in the development of Deaf personal and cultural identity. In one workshop, many deaf participants were actually criticized for signing a story in a way that too closely mimicked Signed Japanese, a derivative language that is considered inauthentic and unimaginative. The instructor, on the other hand, “stressed the importance of imagery and everyday experience” when using JSL and used a variety of facial expressions to keep his viewers engaged (Fedorowicz).

And it turns out that being physically connected to the emotional content of a painful story is far more important from a therapeutic perspective than simply telling the story out loud. “Recollection without affect,” note Freud and Breuer, “invariably produces no result” (van der Kolk 184). Paradoxically, then, Yoon-a’s “muteness”

forces her to tell her story in a more productive way. Instead of recounting the events stone-faced, her communication has to be grounded in physical awareness.

*As I sit, aware of my body, I stop trying to find the words to tell my story. And all of a sudden, the words appear: my roommate went off his medications and attacked me; I was trapped with him for the rest of the term. Nothing less, and nothing more. Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in; breathing out, I know I'm breathing out.*

In order to understand Yoon-a's significance in *Drive My Car*, we must understand Japanese cultural attitudes toward silence. In a now-published talk entitled "A Deep Sense of Human Value," Zen master Katagiri Roshi employed a word that expresses the essence of those attitudes: *mokurai* (63). "*Moku*" he said, "means silence, and *rai* means thunder . . . So you are silent, but simultaneously there are many words, many explanations, and many representations there . . . there is an enormous voice like thunder there" (63).

*Submerged in silence, sensations alone are now enough. As I stop running from my memories and trying to return to my former self, I surrender to a much larger sense of self, one that is by nature in flux, impermanent, and insubstantial, ready to change at any instant.*

During a scene in which the cast of *Uncle Vanya* rehearses outside in a shady grove, we witness how acting is revitalizing Yoon-a. After weeks of forbidding his actors to show emotion, Yusuke finally allows them to perform, at which point Yoon-a does something radical: she improvises. In a scene between Sonya, played by Yoon-a, and Yelena, played by Chinese-American cast member Janice, Yelena confesses her misery and bemoans, "Happiness, for me, doesn't exist in this world." Then, upon seeing Sonya's reaction, she stops short. "Why are you laughing?" she asks. "I'm happy," Sonya signs. "I'm just so happy." Yelena grins, turns away, and shakes her head, bemused; "I want to play the piano now," she pines. Suddenly, Yoon-a picks up a leaf from the ground and presents it to Janice. "Do play," she urges, wrapping her arms around her from behind (1:53:10-1:53:50). This small gesture, a gift of vitality and presence, breathes new life into their performance, and the monotony of the film is finally broken.

*The veil that separated me from reality has been lifted: before, I felt that the wind was blowing; now, I feel the wind blowing; I relax and feel its coolness against my skin.*

So far, all of our attempts to understand Yoon-a's transformative power have required an analysis of language, whether voiced or unvoiced. But because trauma is preverbal, communication between traumatized people must ultimately transcend language.

What does this look like in theory? It entails, to borrow a phrase from film theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, "speaking nearby." "Speaking nearby," according to the description from a museum exhibition on the topic, "sets itself apart from 'speaking about;' it refers to an indirect form of speaking that does not objectify topics and subjects but reflects upon itself and is capable of approaching topics and subjects from up close" ("Migration: Speaking Nearby"). Just as when resting in physical awareness,

when speaking nearby, the distinction between subject and object—those interlocking gears that set all language in motion and give rise to the notion of the “other”—can fade away. In other words, it is unnecessary to speak about trauma in order to “speak” nearby it.

What does it look like in practice? Yoon-a demonstrates best. With Misaki in the audience, she delivers the monologue we have heard Yusuke’s wife repeat so many times during his long, monotonous drives. In it, Sonya encourages Vanya—played, in the end, by Yusuke himself—not to lose hope.



Fig 1. “*Drive My Car Scene.*” *YouTube.* 2021.

I watch this scene tranquil and whole, once more at a loss for words, but this time free from fear. Yoon-a is not signing for Yusuke, nor is she signing to him; she is signing with and nearby him. At once, five dimensions are collapsed into none: the distance between Yoon-a, Sonya, Yusuke, Vanya, Misaki, and us is dissolved. In a film that chronicles the collective isolation of its speaking characters, we finally have preverbal communion: characters, actors, and audience merge in a shared experience, a oneness that exists beyond words, beyond signs, beyond stories; now safe, we can reclaim the void.

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