

Woman Running in the Mountains

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Woman Running in the Mountains, by Yuko Tsushima. Translated by Geraldine Harcourt. New York Review of Books, 2022. ISBN: 9781681375977, 275 pages (paperback).

The book publishing division of the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB) has recently reissued the English translation of Yuko Tsushima's novel, *Yama o Hashiro Onna* (1980). This translation by Geraldine Harcourt, titled *Woman Running in the Mountains*, was first published by Pantheon Books in 1991. The welcome new paperback edition by NYRB adds an Introduction by the American writer Lauren Groff, who finds Takiko, the novel's 22-yr. old unwed mother, as a "profoundly unheroic heroine" gifted with a pastoral imagination that enlivens her capacity to endure--and sometimes enjoy--a rather grim urban existence while raising her son singlehandedly. Takiko's pastoralism, subtended by her spontaneity, is not a green ideology but an intuitive resource that helps empower and safeguard the autonomy of her decisions no matter how unsystematic, while most of her fellow Japanese citizens, including young parents, lead conventional and orderly lives. As we will see, the word "gifted" invoked above remains ambiguous in a cultural milieu where individual spontaneity is judged uncouth and impractical. The character trait which one culture deems a gift another culture deems a handicap.

Yuko Tsushima is the pen name for Satoko Tsushima, the daughter of the renowned existential author, Osamu Dazai, who killed himself a year after she was born on March 30, 1947. She kept this fact of her tragic celebrity secret, even from her literary peers, and lived a unglamorous life among working-class people and ethnic minorities. As Tsushima explains in an interview, she preferred the name Tsushima Yūko (津島 佑子) because it suggests expansion to the outside, to the periphery (e.g., of mainstream work culture and parenting norms). As this review will show, the author's biographical trope of exteriority prefigures the psychosocial experience of her fictional protagonist, Takiko, who is often

inconvenienced by being an outsider but not deeply troubled. In short, Takiko *owns* her exteriority as a lifestyle.

Given the above comments about the author, Tsushima, it follows that she was a close friend of Kenji Nakagami, who wrote about indigenous people in Japan, a subject matter that became a focus and theme of Tsushima's work as her career advanced and she garnered literary awards such as the Kawabata Prize. Tsushima's writing was so remarkable that, according to the prestigious scholar and critic, Kojin Karatani, she was a sure bet to win the Noble Prize in Literature had she lived a few more years. Karatani observed that "Tsushima wrote about marginal beings—illegitimate children, orphans, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, animals. She was a writer who had empathy and a deep love for the oppressed. And she was active on their behalf in many parts of the world. For example, she once taught a course at a French university about the literature of the Ainu."

In *Woman Running in the Mountains*, the beleaguered heroine, Takiko, conjures or envisions bucolic phantasms such as alpine glades, oceanic seascapes, green pastures, while other times she amplifies or enhances the resonance of natural phenomena that empirically occupy her field of consciousness: "vista of blue sky"; "shadowy masses of mountains"; "transparent light that glittered on a faraway ridge" (176-177). Takiko seeks neither power nor prestige; it remains unclear exactly what inner longing or necessity inspires her poetic perceptions, whether real or phantasmal, but Takiko leans on them and into them, they support her existential struggles, give her traction; and they transport her toward the outside. Hence, by the end of the novel, she is no longer embedded within a strictly urban setting, but happily works for a landscaping business (Misawa Gardens) that maintains greenhouses on a mountain slope for its supplies, while episodically hooking up with a coworker. She does not professionally plan such a career outcome, nor academically prepare for it; but her spontaneity and integral relation with the elemental world guide her almost subconsciously to the mountain slope and new lover at the end of the novel. Such an outcome is feasible because Takiko does not question its feasibility nor prejudge her ability to succeed. When an opportunity seems compatible with her personal ecology, she goes for it.

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In a traditional culture where thought is unapologetically shaped to follow social conventions and comply with historically reified norms, the publication of a novel like *Woman Running in the Mountains* is of more than passing interest because its protagonist is spontaneous. Spontaneity, which, like availability, is usually (if unfairly) associated with youth but not a specific gender or sexual orientation, is defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary* as “the quality of being natural rather than planned in advance.” This definition begs the question of what it means to be natural, and as the novel under review demonstrates, being natural (spontaneous...) is modalized in ways that are culturally specific. Acting naturally or spontaneously in a suburb of Tokyo is not identical to acting naturally in Malibu, California, or Cambridge, England. It is worthwhile to keep this distinction in mind as one reads *Woman Running in the Mountains*, where spontaneity shows itself within a Japanese milieu that perceives it negatively, as impulsiveness (衝動性) and heedlessness (不相应, 上の空). This is one of the novel’s unique accomplishments, to quietly challenge this cultural denial of spontaneity, enacted through the precarious lives of Takiko and her son, Akira. As a pregnant and then new mother, Takiko goes with the unsteady flow of her own resonance and steep learning curve in practical wisdom. Her lack of long-term planning, which appears *impractical*, scandalizes those who know Takiko, but their anxiety and condemnation are theirs, not hers. As Hartmut Rosa argues, most people, regardless of their heritage and ethnicity, seek to control or schematize the sector of reality in which they find themselves, but by doing so, miss the “resonance” or depth dimension of life lived spontaneously (37). They learn by rote the path of least resistance by following the most copacetic and efficient in-order-to relations. In Takiko’s space devoid of normative automatisms, life becomes more vulnerable, as Hartmut Rosa would describe it (53), but this very exposedness invites resonance, the feeling of life in its plentitude and disorder.

The novel under review depicts experiences before the era of social media. Takiko does not take selfies or post her son’s photos on Instagram. In this regard, contemporary readers might not be sufficiently stimulated by Takiko’s singular accomplishment, namely, overcoming cultural resistance and coping with daily challenges while staying true to one’s

transcendental intuition of existence. To repeat, one of the most noteworthy differences between Takiko's behavior and that of social media users is that Takiko does not publicize or proselytize her lifestyle and personal developments. Her stoical self-containment (in a dyadic structure with son Akira) does not need to call attention to itself. This does not mean she has no fun or pleasure, but that those experiences are private. Takiko's lifestyle is, as Emily Dickinson says in a poem, "too intrinsic for renown." Of course, by omission this narrative begs the question of why so many millions of people today desperately seek attention, the competition for which drives people to increasingly spectacular and glamorous antics destined to be photographed and then posted online.

Takiko's family regards her a promiscuous failure; her friends think she is a quirky and ambivalent free spirit. Her natural spontaneity is never perceived as praiseworthy, but, if anything, as a sort of handicap. Do their negative opinions mean that her fellow citizens have become unnatural or unfree? If so, has their *unnatural* behavior become *naturalized* over the course of generations such that it feels natural for them to be unnatural? Has unfreedom likewise been naturalized? (What a funny question...yet today it pertains to users of social media whose freedom of thought has been stealthily usurped by attention capture algorithms.) These questions do not trouble Takiko in any sort of self-conscious manner, for as a free spirit her thoughts and actions are intuitively geared to her survival as a single mother in Tokyo. There is a scene in which Takiko visits a bar she has not frequented since motherhood befell her not as a crisis, but as a new lifestyle, a new mode of being-in-the-world. Although she has no plan except to relax, she cares for her child in public while chatting with a former lover whose name escapes her:

Takiko was struggling to remember the young man's name. She's been nineteen when they'd gone out on Saturday nights to all-night movies, or a pool, or a beer garden. Two or three times he's gotten into her bed. This much she could remember. But she felt strangely unsure that any of it had ever happened. Though it had only been two years ago, at that time she could never have foreseen Akira's birth. Takiko had lain blankly with open eyes under the young man's body. She had flung out her limbs and said nothing, lying there like

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lumber. The image came back to her as if it were a scene from early childhood; she could even believe she might have dreamt it. So too with her memory of Hiroshi Maeda's body. Without his body, however, Akira could not have been born. (101)

Notice Takiko's lack of sentimentality or possessiveness associated with relationships, which are genuinely casual. Lovers become nameless personages. Sex with her child's father, Hiroshi Maeda, is another casual development, only more significant due to its outcome. But she is unperturbed by the way Maeda predictably distances himself upon news of the childbirth; she does not pursue him or seek legal reprisal. In a subsequent scene, Takiko revisits the same bar, ends up doing some heavy drinking and hooks up with another lover from her past, Kawano. She returns to Kawano's place every so often for casual sex, even after she falls in love with a coworker at the landscaping nursery that employs her toward the end of the novel. Such spontaneity tends to epitomize so-called *free spirits* ungoverned by convention. The question for each culture thus becomes, what does *our* culture make of such free spirits? Are they welcomed or condemned? Do we cultivate them, encourage them in school and at the workplace? In the arts, free spirits have their advocates; but in Japan, as I said, their spontaneity is negatively perceived as impulsive, unfiltered behavior, a hindrance if not a handicap. No one who finishes this novel will say that Takiko has an easy time raising her child, maintaining friendships, dealing with economic distress, domestic abuse, and so on. She negotiates--finesses and bumbles--events in her own way, by trial and error, until the end of the story. And in the final pages, we observe Takiko still alive and healthy, as is her son, Akira; she is happily employed by a landscaping business; and she has a lover who happens to be a married coworker with family. That latter detail, one taboo among others that Takiko transgresses throughout the story, is characteristic of her nonconformist ways. This was already boldly apparent in her so-called illegitimate childrearing, rare in Japan. As a footnote included on the novel reveals, in 1980, the illegitimate birthrate in Japan was 0.8 percent, vs. the American rate of 18.4 percent (93).

I said earlier that the author, Tsushima, is not advocating politics or ideology. Her protagonist, Takiko, does not choose her own nature but *remains true to it* as intuited, as lived. For how can one choose to be

spontaneous? Rather, one grows to accept oneself, one's own ways, in the face of public disapproval. Or one does not. This reviewer hesitates to describe the way Takiko contends with the precarity of events as following a method or strategy, much less a philosophy—the inner propulsion and guidance in her unconventional life are more intrinsic than strategic. After all, isn't a "philosophy of spontaneity" oxymoronic? You can see how this issue of being natural complicates *agency*. Things get done in Takiko's way, according to Takiko's embodied proprioception, which is maternal but not exclusively maternal. When Takiko desires a man's company, she makes the necessary advances to get male company, and her status as a single mother does not disqualify her from doing so. She is free to do so—as a burst of freewill to bind another will, another agency. Spontaneity is the freedom of embodied consciousness to harness the power of the present moment without the filter of convention. This means her identity as a mother is not strictly socialized but spontaneously actualized according to nature.

Yama o Hashiro Onna appeared during a literary era of diminished expectations popularized in the minimalist American fiction of Raymond Carver and other so-called dirty realists. It would be a gross understatement to say Carver's writing influenced Japanese writers. In any case, the wealth associated with the rise of Japan Inc. in the eighties is not depicted by Tsushima except as a distant and inaccessible horizon. The wealth so apparently abundant in Japan is not an object of desire for Takiko, who notices subtle fulgurations of natural light and is drawn to poetic displays of natural beauty: "Beyond closed French windows the trees could be seen, tipped with gleaming light... The light that filtered into the room was soft and green. She could have been in a cabin in the mountains. Cicadas echoed in the distance" (44-45). This is an early scene in which Takiko, assessing the prospect of a childcare operation for her newborn, slips into an interval of transcendental reverie. Her focus is not on the childcare institution itself, but its natural setting, the light it provides which exceeds its visual significance and warms the body, energizes it, instills optimism.

Such scenes, which are remarkably abundant for such a short narrative, are reminiscent of the feminine perceptual order depicted by Virginia Woolf in a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway*. For some women, the in-

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order-to relations of the lifeworld seem to resist patriarchal coding. When they step outdoors, they see flowers first, and plants, trees, sunlight, weather patterns, small creatures rustling in the shrubbery—all the things one learns to ignore on the way to one's workplace. One can argue that these relevance structures are gendered, but one should avoid simplification. The point is, as a protagonist, Takiko is wired differently than the people scurrying past her on the sidewalk—both men and women. She dwells within an envelope of intimate perception in which her bodily sensations and intuitive observations have as more command of her orientation in space than the psychophysical codes which underpin the social order.

Today, in the context of parenting in view of shame culture, Takiko would be the target of relentless vituperation. Those who find traditional Asian cultures more conformist than Western cultures should take a sober look at the algorithms and raging trends that captivate the attention and unify the behavior of millions of internet users worldwide. It would surely be inaccurate to presume that those spellbound millions have ready access to the spontaneity of consciousness. Only today, in the age of social media, can readers appreciate the rarity of autonomous beings like Takiko, people whose individuation is powered by spontaneity. She understands herself, but that too is unscripted, tacit, hence does not resemble calculative or grammaticized self-understanding. A cliché comes to mind: she is *in touch with her feelings*. Not exactly: but she *thinks for herself*, and urban life has not dulled her instincts. A rebel by nature but unpolitical, she can be casual or seemingly careless, but this mellow persona never disarms Takiko's persistent willfulness. As an unwed mother, she is often challenged but rarely overwhelmed by a lack of communal support and understanding. She had no prior expectations: her pregnancy was unplanned.

In cultures guided by the values of capitalism, spontaneity is commonly understood as a sort of psychophysical fiat by which an individual suddenly *perceives an opportunity* and *optimizes the freedom* to respond. This is an instrumental way of defining spontaneity, the antithesis to its random sense as suggested by André Gide's *acte gratuit* which occurs beyond an instrumental matrix. With the instrumental type, whether such spontaneity realizes the chance, monetizes the chance,

responds effectively or successfully, is another matter decided on a case-by-case basis. In other words, our understanding of spontaneity as a curiously natural mode of unfettered *cognition and motility* does not encompass an evaluation of its relative success or failure based on outcomes assessment. Let's say a young woman, Mary, knows the manager is not interviewing today for a new position that has recently been created, but while passing the manager's office, she notices the door ajar, and spontaneously (on a lark, by fiat, on the spur of the moment) knocks on the door and is invited into the office, where she politely inquires when interviewing will begin. Now, this situation can go wrong or not. The manager admires Mary's proactive spirit and ends up hiring her, or the manager finds Mary arrogant and peremptory. In any case, different cultures assign distinctive values to Mary's spontaneity, and those values reveal their relative appreciation of human freedom.

At times, Takiko seems a victim less of society than her own independent nature. But to infer victimhood--Takiko as inexorable victim of herself and Japanese society—is to adopt a pessimism which, in the face of Takiko's spirited resilience, proves irrelevant. Perhaps the best approach to clarifying Takiko's existential refrain or recipe in 1981 is by routing it via the discourse of governmentality adopted by Michel Foucault in his lectures from 1982-83. This discourse, "archaeologically" excavated from classical wisdom to pinpoint the ways we are governed and the ways we govern ourselves, lends itself in turn to the general ecology articulated by Felix Guattari in his *Three Ecologies*. Takiko governs herself in a style and ecology that appears ungoverned to others, but that is only because they do not recognize her *personal style of self-governance*. She takes care of the things and people that directly precondition her capacity to raise and live with her child. She attends to those things and people, thereby confirming Foucault's assertion that the care of the self "requires a relationship to the other. In other words: one cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person" (43). Her father beats her, her mother pleads with Takiko to first abort and then put the baby up for adoption. Yet Takiko continues to live with her parents for the shelter she herself cannot afford. There is an implicit choice in this homebound default, which is to avoid unnecessary suffering and discomfort while raising her son.

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The novel under review, *Woman Running in the Mountains* is not a self-conscious, overtly ambitious or profound literary effort chasing fame through awards and cinematic destiny. Nor is it in any obvious sense a political novel unless one argues that the personal is political. If anything, this novel is so personal as to be impermeable to ideological concerns as typically understood. We follow a young woman coping with basic sociobiological challenges without ever gaining an overview of her total situation. Out of shame Takiko's parents implore her to abort or put the baby up for adoption, but Takiko seems almost oblivious to the condemnatory gaze of those who know she had a child out of wedlock. The title is misleading insofar as Takiko never runs through real mountains but envisions herself doing so, then gains employment on the slope of a mountain. Episodic glimpses of green sublimity keep her in the game. Takiko is a secret partisan not only of spontaneity, but *resonance* as defined by Hartmut Rosa: the gritty slog of existence; beauty in the hills; the throbbing of her heart next to that of her child. She doesn't relinquish her personal freedom, but nor does she make it a political spectacle. Look for it (her freedom) in her choices. She follows the basic rules of social obligation but never at the cost of her eccentric lifestyle. Takiko finds a new lover who is also a preoccupied parent; their responsibilities give them a sense of restricted freedom that feels grounded and not gratuitous. Takiko seduced him, as she did her former lover; when her desire is aroused, it has imperative force. Yet she has no sense of herself as a dominatrix. Such labels would strike her as absurdly irrelevant to the flow of real life, life as lived, not life as a spectacle enacted by others and viewed at a distance. Her story is largely about the struggle for existence at the basic level: travails of pregnancy, giving birth, caregiving, supporting loved ones, eating, sheltering, earning basic wages. Yet at no point do we suspect that Takiko is a victim of the biopolitical regime that condemns unwed mothers. She is loosely pragmatic, unconventional except when convention is advantageous for family survival.

In a ramshackle house in a back alley, a father beats his daughter for getting pregnant out of wedlock, and no one notices except family members, who cringe and look the other way. Although the brutality lasts for years, Takiko eventually fights back. The modest scale of things and quality of life remain consistently drab and dispirited in the sunless back

streets of Tokyo; the obscurity absorbs resonance and feels like a spiritual wasteland to Takiko. That is why she envisions carrying her baby through the mountains. Takiko, while not disagreeable or inflexible, is not prone to take up and defend anyone's position but her own evolving perspective within a rigidly judgmental milieu. This does not make her a difficult person; in fact, she is reserved but approachable and sincere; rather, she makes difficulties for herself by relying on *her own agency* rather than rely on external agencies of the social order. She disavows her inherited family status in the social hierarchy and establishes a new family register that puts herself and her son at the front of the new generation. Yet she continues to live in her parents' home because the survival of her child depends on it.

In this Japanese novel, conventional binaries fail exegesis. Takiko is not active or passive, nor reactive, but passively active; she gears into existence at her own speed, harvesting resonance where she can find it. Takiko desimplifies binary expectations that typically comprise the shame culture associated with parenting. Some readers will resort to the label of "impulsive." Others will say "stubborn." Still others, "whimsical." It might be wise if such adjectives are used without the semantic baggage and negativity with which they are usually associated for Japanese and non-Japanese readers alike. Takiko deploys herself spontaneously without lots of preconceived notions for how to do things. There is no either/or: her behavior is a sign of strength, of fierce independence, but also a disability! She is quietly nonconformist in a historically conformist society. While she learns from her social interactions and economic circumstances, she is not automatically mimetic or compliant; her intimate rapport with her environment mediates her response to her surroundings when the social order trades intimacy for efficiency and profit.

Although *Woman Running in the Mountains* was published in 1980, the steadfast if quirky *autonomous resistance* demonstrated by Takiko in child-rearing and employment anticipates the "quietly quitting" attitude of parents and professionals after the coronavirus pandemic. They can't "do it all" without severe stress and anxiety, so they don't do it all. This existential development is described by Amelia Nagoski, a published authority on career burnout, in a recent interview with Caroline Nice that appeared in *The Atlantic*:

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If we don't abandon the cultural demands that require us to conform in ways that aren't natural to us, burnout progresses as we worry about the gap between who we are and who we are expected to be. When we understand that we will never cross that divide, and we see that we truly don't want to be the people that we are told we "should" be, we are freed to understand our worth on our own terms.

I hope this book review convinces you that Takiko's enlightened approach to child-rearing and career choices, subtended by her intuitive pastoralism, is quietly progressive in its stand against social conformity. Those mothers who today allow their child-rearing practices to be scolded and bullied on social media can learn something about the problems and possibilities of autonomy from Takiko, who is stronger and more resilient than them even when she makes mistakes. Guided by her nature and transcendental intuitions, her self-determination takes form untroubled by external expectations or shame culture. NYRB has made a most timely decision to republish *Woman Running in the Mountains*.

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