

THE NOVELIST YOKO TAWADA CONJURES A WORLD BETWEEN LANGUAGES

*Writing in Japanese and German, Tawada explores borderlands in which
people and words have lost their moorings.*

By Julian Lucas

February 21, 2022



Writing one novel, Tawada alternated languages at five-sentence intervals. Illustration by Pei-Hsin Cho

According to Yoko Tawada, literature should always start from zero. She is a master of subtraction, whose characters often find themselves stripped of language in foreign worlds. They are, for the most part, at the mercy of circumstances: a literate circus bear betrayed by her publisher, an interpreter who loses her tongue, a nineteenth-century geisha discussing theology with an uncomprehending Dutch merchant. But their creator—a novelist, a poet, and a playwright—has chosen her estrangement. Tawada, who was born in Tokyo and lives in Berlin, writes books in German and Japanese, switching not once, like Vladimir Nabokov or Joseph Conrad, but every time she gets too comfortable, as a deliberate experiment. Her work has won numerous awards in both countries, even as she insists that there's nothing national, or even natural, about the way we use words. "Even one's mother tongue," she maintains, "is a translation."

Tawada's latest novel, "Scattered All Over the Earth" (New Directions), imagines a world in which Japan has disappeared. Stranded in Denmark, a refugee named Hiruko searches for fellow-survivors, torn between longing for her mother tongue and the desire to fashion a new one. Her odyssey becomes a fairy-tale test of the commonplace idea that, as one character puts it, "the language of a native speaker is perfectly fused with her soul." Tawada has been described as the world's leading practitioner of "exophonic literature," or writing in a foreign language, a description that her unique practice has made applicable to nearly all her work. "I have to let my German go when I work with Japanese," she has said. "I don't want to get familiar with one language." The constant shuttling has more to do with existential displacement than with cross-cultural exchange: Tawada, as the new novel's English translator, Margaret Mitsutani, has observed, is "not nearly as interested in crossing borders as she is in the borders themselves."

Sometimes these boundaries are geographic. In her short story "The Shadow

Man,” Tawada imagines the philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo’s journey from enslavement in Ghana to the courts of eighteenth-century Europe, pausing over the long ocean crossing. In other cases, the divide is metaphysical.

Tawada’s novella “The Bridegroom Was a Dog,” a slim erotic fable, concerns a schoolteacher whose suitor may or may not be a dog. Most of the time, the borders themselves occupy a borderland between real and unreal.

In Tawada’s dreamlike travelogue “Where Europe Begins,” an early short story, a young Japanese woman travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway tries to identify where, exactly, one continent shades into another, but none of the passengers can agree. Gradually, she descends into a trance brought on by reading Tungus and Samoyed fairy tales, which cut across the journey like a polar wind. The woman learns from an atlas that Japan is, tectonically, a “child of Siberia that had turned on its mother and was now swimming alone in the Pacific . . . a seahorse, which in Japanese is called *Tatsu-no-otoshigo*—the lost child of the dragon.” She begins to dread the finality of arrival.

As a young woman, Tawada took the same six-thousand-mile railway trip, on a visit to Germany in 1979; she left Japan permanently three years later. “When I was a child, I thought all people in the world spoke only Japanese,” she has said. But a larger world of letters revealed itself through her father, who owned a bookshop in Tokyo and imported titles from abroad. Tawada studied Russian literature at Waseda University and yearned to pursue further study in the Soviet Union—an impossibility, as it turned out, because of the Cold War. Instead, Tawada went to Hamburg, where she initially took a job at one of the companies that supplied her father’s bookshop. At Hamburg University, she fell under the influence of writers like Gertrude Stein, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin, and especially Paul Celan, a German-speaking Jew from Romania, whose poetry became a model for her anti-nationalist vision of language and translation.

Tawada published her first book, a bilingual poetry collection, in 1987, and steadily won acclaim in Germany and Japan. A major breakthrough came in

2004, with the novel “The Naked Eye.” She wrote it in German and Japanese simultaneously, alternating languages at five-sentence intervals, as though playing a solitary game of exquisite corpse. Perhaps her finest work, it is narrated by a Vietnamese high-school student who’s abducted in East Berlin before delivering a speech to other Communist youth leaders. She escapes to Paris, where what might have been a tragedy shades into a down-and-out adventure as absurd and exhilarating as Dostoyevsky’s “Notes from Underground.”

The girl takes refuge from street life in an obsession with the films of Catherine Deneuve. Her trips to the cinema become portals to an alternate reality—never mind that she can’t understand a word. Eventually, a wealthy compatriot takes her in, but the girl finds that her “stomach” can no longer endure Vietnamese, and she refuses to learn French. Movies are the only language that her freedom requires, as she confides to Deneuve’s image: “I was studying a science that had no name. I was studying it on the screen, along with you.”

The displacement is yet more surreal in “Memoirs of a Polar Bear,” a saga published in 2011 about three generations of ursine acrobats in Berlin. It is, as improbable as it sounds, a historical novel: Tawada fictionalizes the lives of Tosca, the Canadian-born star of the East German state circus, and her son, Knut, whom she rejected at birth, and whose miraculous survival at the Berlin Zoo sparked a worldwide craze in the early two-thousands. Tawada augments the family with an imperious matriarch from Moscow, who defects to West Germany and writes a best-selling memoir entitled “Thunderous Applause for My Tears.”

The novel is at once a sardonic parody of émigré literature, a meditation on climate change, and an earnest consideration of what it means to live in the interstices of species, countries, and cultures—especially those around the Arctic, where so many borders disappear. Tawada returns again and again to the miraculous unlikelihood of all communication. In a trick called “the kiss of death,” a human trainer places a sugar cube on her tongue and offers it to her polar-bear companion. The bear and the human have improvised the stunt in a

shared dream, which neither can be certain is real until the moment their tongues meet. “A human soul turned out to be less romantic than I’d imagined,” the bear reflects. “It was made up primarily of languages—not just ordinary, comprehensible languages, but also many broken shards of language, the shadows of languages, and images that couldn’t turn into words.”

After the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, in 2011, Tawada’s preoccupation with linguistic precarity found a new focus. She was among the many Japanese writers who spoke out against atomic energy, and when she toured the abandoned city she was struck by the fragments of orphaned language: a “Closed Today” sign on the door of a beauty salon, unread newspapers stacked in an office. They were mute testaments, she wrote, to a meltdown in “the core of trust for continuity”—an unease that she channelled, in 2014, in her novel “The Emissary.” Set in an irradiated Japan where the young die early while their elderly caretakers are condemned to live forever and watch, it imagines a society decaying from within. Tokyo is abandoned: “In banquet halls, the smell of cigarettes smoked long ago froze in the silver silence . . . and rats took leisurely naps inside high-heeled shoes.”

Tawada satirizes the reactionary isolationism that so often preys on disaster. The remnants of Japan’s government ban travel and foreign imports, in an echo of the islands’ isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate. The language withers; the protagonist, an elderly writer, notes, “The shelf life of words was getting shorter all the time.” Meanwhile, a secret society sends the young abroad to find help. The novel’s original title, “Kentoshi,” alludes to a series of delegations sent by Japan’s imperial court in the seventh century to study China, whence they brought back everything from new Buddhist sects to tea. Bold exchanges, the novel suggests, will be needed to survive the future’s ecological devastation—or even to find words to describe it.

“**S**cattered All Over the Earth,” Tawada’s playful and deeply inventive new novel, isn’t quite a sequel to “The Emissary,” but it shares the conceit of a Japan amputated from the world. The first installment of a trilogy, it begins in Copenhagen, where a graduate student in linguistics named Knut is watching a

televised panel on vanished countries. Among the speakers is Hiruko, a young woman originally from “an archipelago somewhere between China and Polynesia.” During her years of seeking asylum, she has invented a language called Panska, which is intelligible throughout Scandinavia. Knut is transfixed: “The smooth surface of my native language broke apart, and I saw fragments of it glittering on her tongue.” He finds Hiruko and joins her search for another surviving native speaker of Japanese.

Hiruko lives in Odense, Denmark, the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen, where she teaches refugee children to speak Panska using folkloric picture dramas. Tawada applies the same fairy-tale conventions—mistaken identity, unexpected metamorphosis—to the dilemmas of finding linguistic shelter in a world of rising seas and ceaseless migration.

When people lose their homes, words lose their moorings: is it better to resist the drift or to swim with the tide? Panska may be the future, but Hiruko still yearns for “my native language, the one I used to breathe in along with the air that filled my lungs, that went down my gullet along with the sweet-and-sour taste of soy sauce and mirin and seeped into the cotton lining of my stomach.”

Linguistic dilemmas repeatedly find their way to the culinary realm. One recurring joke is the European assimilation of sushi, which Knut innocently describes to Hiruko as “Finnish home cooking.” When she objects, Knut shows her a local sushi shop decorated with a Finnish cartoon creature resembling a hippo—Moomin, from Tove Jansson’s beloved children’s series—as proof of the cuisine’s nationality. But Hiruko counters that Moomin, too, is Japanese, noting the nineties anime show that catapulted the character to worldwide celebrity. She replies in Panska:

moomin to my country as exile came . . . finland between ussr and western europe in difficult balance was caught, great stress for moomin loss of weight caused, to restore round body shape moomin exile. became, as lover of snow, in my area lived.

Such games of telephone intensify as more people attach themselves to

Hiruko's quest. Knut accompanies her to the German city of Trier, where they hope to meet a Japanese chef at a workshop on making dashi. But when they arrive they learn that the chef, Tenzo, has suddenly left town. His crestfallen girlfriend, Nora, a German, agrees to join them in following him, as does Akash, a trans woman from India who falls in love with Knut. The characters all take turns as narrator, contributing their own incongruous understanding; Tawada elevates the comedy of mistranslation to a principle of narrative.

Tenzo, as it happens, isn't Japanese at all. He's an Indigenous Greenlander originally named Nanook, who stumbled into a Japanese identity while living in Denmark and Germany; because of his work and his anime-inspired hair style, everyone, including Nora, has assumed that he's from the "land of sushi." The character is an elaborate joke at the expense of ethnolinguistic authenticity: he has, ironically, assumed a Japanese identity to escape the assumptions around being an "Eskimo" in Denmark. Yet Tenzo's escape from one authenticity trap only leads him to another, when he's forced to leave for Oslo to keep Nora from learning that he isn't Japanese.

His masquerade also reveals unexpected lines of kinship. "Nanook" is the name of a legendary Inuit polar-bear king—an allusion to Tawada's earlier novel and her long-standing interest in the Far North as a realm beyond national borders. When Hiruko asks Tenzo where he's from, he says Karafuto, a former prefecture of Japan that is now Russia's island of Sakhalin. It's a place where Indigenous Siberians once lived alongside groups native to the Japanese archipelago, such as the Ainu. A further connection is suggested when Knut reveals that his great-grandfather was a polar explorer. Perhaps these lost children of the Arctic are related, after all.

Tawada wrings a lot of punning mileage from the concept of a "mother tongue." Her male characters are all in flight from women. Tenzo is fleeing not just Nora but also a Danish benefactor, who gave him a scholarship out of maternal affection for the "Eskimos." Knut is avoiding his real mother, mostly because of her instinctive grasp of the way he uses language to evade responsibility. His repulsion leads him toward Hiruko, whose Panska sounds

freely strange—but she, of course, is in the grip of an ambivalent longing for her native speech. The linguistic love triangles culminate in a somewhat chaotic dénouement, filled with comedy and coincidence. Hiruko does eventually find another native speaker, but the encounter comes with a twist that undermines the whole search.

Tawada has always had a talent for ventriloquizing eccentrics, following singular minds through fugue and limbo. “Scattered All Over the Earth” departs from this model by introducing a team of such characters—a shift from exploring the inner worlds of linguistic displacement toward Babel-like allegory. As metafiction, it succeeds brilliantly, sketching a grim global dilemma with the sort of wit and humanism that Italo Calvino, in a discussion of lightness in literature, described as “weightless gravity.”

But the novel occasionally falters in its efforts to imbue the characters with psychological depth; splitting the difference between a high-concept fairy tale and a realist novel is a hard trick to pull off. Family traumas and romantic dramas can feel like laborious pretexts to illuminate some aspect of language as lived experience. Akash, for instance, is conveniently drafted into the narrative by falling in love with Knut not long after he recognizes her language: “You knew that we were speaking Marathi, didn’t you? I am truly amazed.” There’s a lot of syntactically stiff exposition. A reader who doesn’t know Japanese can only guess at how much of this rests with Mitsutani’s translation—and how much is Tawada’s stylistic choice. Perhaps a novel about the messy birth of a language isn’t supposed to sound “natural,” a concept that Tawada has always viewed with suspicion.

Hanging over the search for a native speaker is all the ethnocentric baggage that the concept implies. When Hiruko and the others reach Oslo, they find that they have arrived in the wake of Anders Behring Breivik’s devastating 2011 mass shooting, a grisly protest against immigration. The atrocity functions as a strange footnote to their adventure: Tenzo is meant to compete in a dashi competition at an Oslo sushi restaurant owned by an ultranationalist who also

happens to be named Breivik—and who soon falls under suspicion of killing a whale. The turn of events skewers Japanese and Norwegian nationalism (both countries attempt to justify whaling through appeals to culinary tradition) by undercutting each society’s imagined uniqueness. Recipes, whales, and words all get around; even in a culture’s most chauvinistic totems, Tawada seems to say, there are traces of the foreign.

Her novel is, in fact, an oblique rejoinder to the founding text of its language’s literary tradition: “Kojiki,” an eighth-century chronicle of the archipelago’s divine origins, and the oldest extant book in Japanese. Tawada has often mocked its austerity, especially its telling of how deities conceived the sun goddess—and, through her, the imperial family. “Scattered All Over the Earth,” by contrast, pays homage to a rejected child of the gods: Hiruko, the bastard “leech-child” of a goddess who has violated the mores of feminine modesty. Like Moses, Hiruko is set adrift in a boat made of reeds, a dead end of Japanese myth that Tawada rewrites as a feminist, migrant-centered beginning. What might it look like, she asks, if the heroes of our myths weren’t founders of nations but stateless castaways, inventors of motherless tongues? ♦

Published in the print edition of the February 28, 2022, issue, with the headline “Motherless Tongue.”