

American Gothic Tanka

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'American Gothic' by Iowa artist Grant Wood is one of the world's iconic pieces of art. It joins Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Munch's *Scream*, and a handful of other works that have been massively copied, adapted, parodied, analyzed, and reported; they have imprinted themselves on our collective psyche. Yet few people know very much about the house, the couple, or the genre.

The 'American Gothic' house is real; it is a modest cottage with a Gothic window in the town of Eldon, Iowa. It is a typical example of 'Carpenter's Gothic,' a vernacular architecture created by craftsmen whose familiarity with older, more formal styles of Gothic architecture combined with the cheapness of the newly available scroll saw to create works of residential art. Carpenter's Gothic melded the imagination of largely self-taught practical architects with a cosmopolitan curiosity about the world to create inexpensive homes and small churches.

Grant Wood was just such a self-taught artist who traveled to Europe to learn more about art. His genius was to meld local and international modes of expression into a distinctive regional style. Although his painting of a dour farm couple with pitchfork was at first taken as a satire on rural Iowa, as the Depression progressed it came to be seen as a portrait of moral virtue in the face of economic disaster. The white cottage is small but not grim; its lace curtain and flowers show that those who lived there were not crushed by the difficulties of the

Depression even though their faces display the toll it took on them. The picture is an ambiguous and multivalent interpretation of many forces, customs, challenges, and hopes. In short, it shares a great deal with the tanka aesthetic of 'dreaming room,' so much so that we may call this painting a 'visual tanka.'

Regional American art has manifested itself in many ways, most recently in tanka. This is hardly surprising. Tanka's call for autobiography and *shasei* (sketches from life), if answered honestly, leads to a regionalism in which local content trumps the imported aesthetic. The first moves in this direction are nearly as old as tanka in English and arise from the tanka aesthetic being ruthlessly true to itself.

Jun Fujita (1888-1963), the first master of tanka in English, fused the Japanese form with scenes from his life in North America:

On a country road
An old woman walks;
The autumn sun casts her shadow
Long and thin.

Tanka : Poems in Exile, 1923

He was followed by many other Japanese American and Japanese Canadian tanka poets. Numerous examples are collected in the mid-20th century anthology, *Sounds from the Unknown* edited and translated by Lucille Nixon and Tomoe Tana.

At the factory
Where I work,
The morning bells are sounding,
And again I begin
To burn up my life's energy.

Keiko Echigo

Quite early in the day,
Going to their city jobs,
People sit in buses,
 And, oh, the beauty of each face
 Reflecting early morning sun.

Fumiko Kiyotoki

I keep my eye
Upon the stove's white enamel,
 For shadows of the outside tree
 Are moving upon it
 Oh, so momentarily.

Rin Ogawa

As the night grew,
The sound of water
From the leaking pipe
 Came on lightly, quietly,
 But ever so persistently.

Shigeru Noji

At Redondo Beach
Where Mexican people dwell,
Ugly oil wells rise,
 But on washdays,
 Oh, the flaming reds
 That flutter in the breeze!

Masanori Toyofuku

(The original tanka was translated into six lines in English.)

In these poems we have a stark, unsentimental grasp of both the hardship and beauty of life. Authored by poets relegated to second class status, working menial jobs, and laboring in circumstances of poverty and discrimination, their poetry has no room for illusions.

The dominant approach to tanka over the last thirty years applies ancient

Japanese aesthetics to contemporary subjects, yielding a neo-classical tanka that attempts to create modern Western versions of the poetry of the *Kokinwakashu* and *Shinkokinwakashu* eras. The *miyabi* (refined elegance, good taste) that attracts many readers and poets to the neo-classical style of tanka is, by definition, missing from 'American Gothic' poetry. Rough-hewn works of local truth that did not satisfy neo-classical taste were brushed aside as irrelevant to tanka in English in the late 20th century and were nearly forgotten. Newly written poems were published only sporadically in the journals and anthologies of the period.

The foremost tanka poet working in the American Gothic style (although he does not use that term to describe his work), is Andrew Riutta. His *Cigarette Butts and Lilacs* (Modern English Tanka Press, 2008) and *The Pie in Pieces* (River Man, 2006) depict his life in rural Michigan. It is a hard scrabble life of poverty, compromises, and a genuine appreciation for beauty in surprising places. Speaking about his new journal, *Rusty Tea Kettle*, intended to showcase poetry of this sort, Riutta says,

[T]he title itself is suggestive of poems that are in keeping with something perhaps a little more authentic. I feel it is important our poems be approached as stories, and in these difficult times, those stories will not always be pretty. Unless the contributor happens to live in the kind of climate that allows for it, readers will not likely find poems in *Rusty Tea Kettle* that mention bamboo leaves; rather, they will encounter the struggles of aging, poverty and alcoholism. While craft is important, it does not outweigh the emotional

impact of a particular poem. Of course, this doesn't mean that all of *Rusty Tea Kettle's* poems are dark and gloomy. We also live in an age of hope. (Email to the author, February 16, 2009.)

The first issue offers a poem of his own as an example of the kind of work he seeks:

With the same kind of gun
he used in Vietnam
my father
shoots the burn barrel
so the fire can breathe.

Rusty Tea Kettle 1

The burn barrel has disappeared from American life, but those of us over a certain age can remember tending the fire to burn the household trash. With its present tense grammar the poem brings us into the here and now, but upon consideration the scene which appears so immediate, so *now*, may very well be a memory of the author's youth. It has parallels in American regional art—Wood frequently appeared in public wearing bib overalls and claimed that his best ideas came while milking cows, but the artist had not actually milked any cows since he was young. Certain experiences remain in the present tense of a fertile mind.

Some more examples of Riutta's work from *Cigarette Butts and Lilacs*:

\$795.00
due by tomorrow.
Everywhere,
all at once,
the wind.

A fifth of rum
and the scent of wood smoke.
I may be a father
and a husband,
but tonight I'm just a man.

This night,
more than others,
I'm tempted
to scratch my back
on that rusty nail.

Another poet working in the field of American Gothic is Denis M. Garrison, the well known publisher of the ecumenical *Modern English Tanka* journal. His 'Iowa poems' are deeply steeped in Wood's American Gothic aesthetic:

fading whistles
and clatter
crossing lights blink off
Iowa at 2 AM
is the dark side of the moon

westbound at last
all I own in a duffel bag
breathing different air
I leave far more
than Iowa behind

abandoned tracks
the curve of rusted rails
into red sunset—
the barmaid's bra
lies exhausted on the bed

from 'The Last Run to Eden.' *Modern English Tanka 1:2*

Garrison was born and raised in a small town in Iowa like the one where the American Gothic house is located. Growing up in the late 1940s he lived on a farm without indoor plumbing or

electricity. Travel was horse-drawn as often as by automobile. The impact of the place is felt deeply by the poet. Garrison says,

The tanka and other poems that I write about Iowa are unique in that they come out more finished than the others. That is, they resist revision and polish; they are what they want to be when they are conceived. I think this is an artifact of coming from an authentic place of pure experience without rationalization. As a child, I spent my days in the manicured nature of a farm culture. Every inch of the land was the way its owner wanted it to be: land under cultivation, fallow fields, orchards, stock yards, dwellings and farm buildings, silos everywhere, a connected tracery of streams, creeks, and drainage ditches. (Email to the author, February 15, 2009)

Compare Garrison's vision of Iowa to Michael McClintock's observations of Nebraska:

stuck on a bus
crossing endless Nebraska,
too much on my mind—
ah, on the noon-bright wheat
the wind and its shadows

Michael McClintock, *Modern English Tanka 1:1*

Here we have a very well known tanka poet simply passing through. The poem is excellent and is an authentic portrait of the poet's travels and appreciation for the scene—but McClintock has merely remarked upon the place, not been marked by it. In American Gothic tanka it is not enough to

merely pass through; the best poems are those in which the poet is the medium through which the *genius loci* speaks. That requires an intimate connection with the place that is usually developed through long residence.

It is only natural to look to Iowa for examples of American Gothic tanka. Even when Iowa is not named, it is powerfully present in my own work:

unfinished quilts
after her funeral,
I recognize
the 'grandmother's fan'
intended for my daughter

'Tanka and Haiku Inspired by Family Quilts.' *Sketchbook : A Journal for Eastern and Western Short Forms 2:3*

Iowa fields, stern
under a November sky . . .
my sister's grief
still rock hard this
second winter

Wisteria 6

I was born in Iowa, and though I left it at a young age, it left its mark on me. It has certainly marked my family—my sister and my mother both returned to Iowa and settled in Grundy Center, a small town located between Garrison's home town of Hampton and the American Gothic town of Eldon. Childhood memories of Ledges State Park and rolling fields of gold are now melded in my mind with a November storm sweeping across the plains for my mother's funeral and the courthouse bell tolling my sister's grief as she buries her mother and her son. These are memories that are always in the present tense.

Iowa may be the start of American Gothic, but it is not the end. Tanka carries us to many places, and many places open themselves to the tanka eye. We have already seen that Andrew Riutta's Michigan, although different from Iowa, carries its own Gothic spirit, but that spirit is found everywhere from Hawaii to New Jersey. It is also found in the works of a widely varied group of poets, not just overall-wearing men with beards.

Case in point, Alexis Rotella's travels to Japan, Russia, Italy and other countries, her residence in New Jersey, her occupation as an acupuncturist, and many other facets of her life have created a sophisticated and thoroughly modern woman. But she has not forgotten where she came from; her childhood in Cairnbrook, Pennsylvania, frequently crops up in her tanka:

Little dipper
filled with cough syrup—
before my grandma
lifts it to my mouth
I smell the stars.

Atlas Poetica 2.

She and an'ya chronicled growing up Slavic in Pennsylvania coal country in their epic renga, 'Round Faces and Nesting Dolls,' which was a winner in the Tanka Splendor Contest from which the following verses are excerpted:

After his father,
and a second generation
coal miner . . .
he stencils O-VICH (*o-vich = son of*)
on hand-me-down work clothes.

an'ya, *Tanka Splendor*, 2008

Three brothers
share their lunch with rats . . .
the four-leggers
who once warned
them of a cave-in.

Shooting stars—
I sit on the stoop with
my nesting dolls,
while inside our house
three generations playing cards.

Alexis Rotella, *Tanka Splendor*, 2008

Many other poets have written American Gothic tanka. The selections below will serve to illustrate the genre as well as any statement made by an editor:

the toilet
at the truck stop
is dirty
and stinks of urine
how good to see it

Dave Bacharach, *Modern English Tanka 1:2*

washing down
my vitamin pill
with whiskey—
I've come to accept
a self of opposites

Dave Bacharach, *Simply Haiku 6:1*

a bluebird house
where her son's ashes
lie buried
he liked little things
the color of the sky

Dave Bacharach, Honorable Mention,
Saigy Award, 2008

scattering salt
on the icy steps
I step back
with a rare sense of doing
something useful

Tom Clausen, *Simply Haiku 6:3*

high clouds . . .
one horse leans in
against another—
before our children
my wife and I were like that

Tom Clausen, *Fire Pearls Vo1 1, 2006*

Queen Anne's Lace and
Black-eyed Susans
by the thousands along the road
and to think
you married me

Tom Clausen, *Fire Pearls Vo1 1, 2006*

the walk back from Rite Aid
a twelve pack and
prescription in hand,
the gas station flag
flapping in the wind

Tom Clausen, *Modern English Tanka*
1:1

mourners assemble
after Joe's funeral—
they come
to pick widow Green's apples
and press out the amber juice

John Daleiden, *Fire Pearls Vo1 1,*
2006

strawberry field
a woman walks the rows
her wide hat
a lampshade
between sun and earth

Magarita Engle, *Atlas Poetica 1*

taking the only piece
of her mother's fine china
not yet smashed,
a battered wife
walks away at dawn

Denis M. Garrison, *Nisqually Delta*
Review 2:2

I am still here
working my sliver of earth—
the oath I swore,
barefoot on the river stones,
to whispering cottonwoods

Denis M. Garrison, *Ash Moon*
Anthology : Poems on Aging in Modern
English Tanka, 2008

narrow joys
of the barnyard dog
chained in place . . .
at some small kindness
I, too, lift my eyes

M. L. Harvey, *Atlas Poetica 2*

where the man
fixes trucks and cars
a loaner dog
pricks up his ears
joins me on my walk

Kirsty Karkow, *Modern English Tanka*
1:1

low grey hills
of barges loaded with gravel,
softened almost into beauty
by the rising of the mist
on the evening bay

M. Kei, *Heron Sea : Short Poems of
the Chesapeake Bay*, 2006

when the rain pelts down
fair weather fishermen leave
the old wooden dock;
an old black man dons his hat
and stays a little longer

M. Kei, *Simply Haiku :4:2*

an abandoned farmhouse
stone eyes gaping
slack-mouthed door
where only flies buzz
in and out

M. Kei, *Modern English Tanka 1:1*

June in Kodiak
without a bit of night
twilight becomes dawn
we switch
from whiskey to coffee

Michael Ketchek, *Atlas Poetica 2*

sitting in a seat
overhanging right field
racing back Kaline
disappears in my dream
of old Tiger Stadium

Michael Ketchek, *Atlas Poetica 2*

In fresh June skies
before the summer-people came
that quietness
day and night
of an un-struck bell.

Gary Lebel, from 'Joyous Lake.'
*Abacus : prose poems, haibun, and short
poems*, 2008

the men who drank whiskey
outside the shipyard gates at dawn
are now the rain
I walk through
in my old hometown

Gary Lebel, *Modern English Tanka 1:2*

spring morning
steam rises
above a barn floor,
fresh straw
covers old tracks

Francis Masat, *Nisqually Delta
Review 3:1*

across the valley
- thunder -
the sound
the sound
the sound

Francis Masat, *Atlas Poetica 2*

a monarch folding
on the plum blossoms—
the falling mist:
my grandpa hitches the mule
to a rusty plow

Lenard Moore, *Five Lines Down : A
Landmark in English Tanka*, 2007

settling cold
a tangerine falls from the stocking
tacked on the mantelpiece
—her shadow slowly bends
to pick it up

Lenard Moore, *Five Lines Down : A
Landmark in English Tanka*, 2007

late summer
a woman presses another's hair
in the kitchen—
inch by inch the sun
reaches the folding chair

Lenard Moore, *Five Lines Down : A
Landmark in English Tanka*, 2007

tilling the garden
I unearth another
rusted horseshoe
how many hill farmers
ploughed here before me?

John Quinnett, *White Lotus 6*

a train whistle
echoes through the hills
first one hound
then another
and another

John Quinnett, *White Lotus 7*

tall weeds swish
off my boots
in the old cemetery . . .
grasshoppers explode
at each step

Edward J. Rielly, *Wind Five Folded*,
1995

autumn night
across the plains
stadium lights
and distant cheers
mark each town

James Rohrer, *Atlas Poetica 1*

nearing the reserve
after the school dance
unforeseen
she's staggering
he's DUI, underage

Guy Simser, *Atlas Poetica 1*

agnostic, I stand
facing up to heritage
on a windswept spine
headstones inclined
to the ancestral kirk

Guy Simser, *Atlas Poetica 1*

ash in the pipe—
grass a deeper green
in the shade;
the retriever appraises me
with his one good eye

Richard Stevenson, *Ash Moon
Anthology : Poems on Aging in Modern
English Tanka*, 2008

as if to say
my turf, my nest:
hawk's insistent cry
reeled off at each
and every tree

Richard Stevenson, *Atlas Poetica 1*

she called me names
she threatened me
this woman who now
murmurs to the plants
as she waters them

George Swede, *Wind Five Folded*,
1995

The astute reader will notice works by Canadian poets among the selections. The 'American Gothic' tanka is not a purely United States phenomenon. It is not even a purely Midwestern or Rust Belt phenomenon, although those areas loom large in the genre. It is not pastoralism, either, in spite of frequent rural scenes. The experiences of working class neighborhoods in large cities share certain characteristics with their rural counterparts; experiences in which life scrapes against the sharp corners of reality. It is very far from the mall-centered, Starbucks-driven, middle class life of the average North American.