

# *Introduction: Take Five*

## *Best Contemporary Tanka*

M. Kei

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Prime, Bob Lucky, and Kala Ramesh, *editors*

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## ***Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka***

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# Note to Readers

This 'Introduction' appears in *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka, Vol. 1* (2008). It is reprinted in the hopes that it will serve as a useful document documenting the history of one of the world's most important poetry forms in Japanese and English. Text is identical, except for the inclusion of this note and errata. Page numbers differs from the printed edition. Please refer to the printed edition for citations and quotations.

The complete anthology is available through MET Press and popular booksellers online such as Lulu.com and Amazon.com.

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## Errata:

Several tanka chapters of the Chaparral Poets of California were in operation before 1964. Thus the Chaparral Poets of California sponsored tanka groups for at least two decades.

The Kisaragi Poem Study Group of Canada published three anthologies, all named *Maple*, in 1972, 1975, and 1981.

## Introduction

### Part One: History

Tanka is a form of poetry originally developed during the archaic period of Japan. A goddess, Wakahime ('poetry princess'), is said to have composed the first one as a lament over her dead husband. It is she who instructed human beings how to write tanka. Everyone, from servant girls to Empresses and border guards to ministers of state, wrote tanka. (Or as it was called in those days, *waka*.) The form was well established by the 700s. The *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*) was completed by 792 AD and contains 4100 tanka as well as miscellaneous other poems.

By the time the *Kokinwakashū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*) in 905 AD, *waka* had obliterated all other forms to become synonymous with 'Japanese poetry.' Ki no Tsurayuki (872-945 AD), editor-in-chief of the *Kokinwakashū*, penned a preface that opened with the lines, "Our native poetry springs from the heart of man as its seed, producing the countless leaves of language."<sup>1</sup> His poetics

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<sup>1</sup> Ki no Tsurayuki, adapted from *Primitive and Mediaeval Japanese Texts translated into English* by F. V. Dickins. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1906. pp 379-391. <<http://www.humanistictexts.org/tsurayuki.htm>>

reigned supreme for a thousand years and is still influential in English-language tanka.

Waka continued to be the dominant form of poetry for a thousand years. During this time the Emperors of Japan established themselves as patrons of poetry and poetry was integral to the public and private lives of the educated classes. Masterpieces were produced, leading to the canonization of great poets as 'Immortals' in the field. It also led to the calcification of poetry. Japanese poetry became increasingly erudite and inaccessible, but even so, its flexibility and versatility spawned several freer forms, such as renga and kyōka. Renga in turn spun off haiku during the 1600s. Kyōka, the comic and irreverent form of waka written in vernacular language, enjoyed a great popularity, then it too fell into decline.

By the end of the nineteenth century, waka was a zombie literature. It walked and moved, but it had no life left in it. Exposed to everything Western during the Meiji period, reformers such as Masaoka Shiki, Yosano Akiko and her husband Yosano Tekkan, Ishikawa Takobuku, and Saitō Mokichi modernized waka poetry. It was Shiki that invented the term 'tanka' to signify the break with the past. Today successful tanka poets are celebrities and their books hit the bestseller lists in Japan. Machi Tawara's *Salad Anniversary* has sold over two million copies in Japanese and has been translated twice into English. The most recent development is 'cell phone tanka,' in which young people compose and send tanka on their cell phones. Tanka continues to evolve and find new audiences who engage the poetry in a myriad of ways.

Although tanka has sometimes been thought to be a recent development, it has been composed and published in English for over a hundred years. The first known publication was Ida Henrietta Bean's book, *Tanka*, in 1899. Sadakichi Hartmann, better known as an art critic than poet, published tanka in his 1904 *Drifting Flowers of the Sea and Others Poems*. The first master of tanka in English was Jun Fujita, whose 1923 *Tanka : Poems in Exile*, successfully bridged the gap between English and Japanese and presented tanka written in a way that melds the intent of tanka with the reality of English. Publishing tanka and some criticism from 1919-1929, Fujita coined one of the shortest and most cogent critiques of Japanese short form poetry. He complained that poets who counted syllables were adopting the "carcass" but not the "essence" of Japanese poetry. He went on to ask, "Where is the fine and illusive mood, big enough to illuminate the infinity of the universe?"<sup>2</sup>

This illusive quality has been repeatedly rediscovered and renamed in English. Lucille Nixon, writing in the introduction to *Sounds from the Unknown*, said, "The image, in other words, the sensory intake, must be clear, but there must be enough space around it so that the reader may delight himself with it by using his own associations."<sup>3</sup> This is the same quality that Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114-1204 AD) called *yūgen*. Often translated as 'mystery and depth,' Shunzei

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<sup>2</sup> Fujjita, Jun. "A Japanese Cosmopolite." *Poetry Magazine*. June, 1922, pp 162-164.

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, Lucille M., ed. *Sounds from the Unknown*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, 1963, p 43.

said, "If it is a good poem, it will possess a kind of atmosphere distinct from its words and their configuration and yet accompanying them."<sup>4</sup> Denis M. Garrison called it "dreaming room," which he defined as "some empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context."<sup>5</sup> While arguments persist over the exact definition of tanka and the importance of a formal form in English, it is generally accepted that dreaming room (in any of its incarnations) is an essential part of tanka.

Tanka was published in Japanese in North America as least as early as the 1920s. Numerous tanka poetry circles sprang up among Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Hawaii and the US mainland. They published journals and member anthologies. Many of them kept writing and publishing even while interned in the United States and Canada during World War II.

In 1957, Lucille Nixon became the first American not of Japanese descent to win the Emperor of Japan's annual poetry contest. Her housekeeper, Tomoe Tana, herself a previous winner, tutored Nixon in Japanese and poetry and introduced her to the tanka poetry circle of which she was a member. In 1963, Nixon and Tana translated, edited, and published *Sounds from the Unknown*, by Japanese Canadians and Americans. An educator by profession, Nixon

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<sup>4</sup> Fujiwara no Shunzei, quoted by Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968, p 101-102.

<sup>5</sup> Garrison, Denis M. 'Dreaming Room.' *Modern English Tanka*. Vol. 1:3. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Spring, 2007, pp 3-4.

succeeded in getting tanka added to the school curriculum in California. Thanks to her outreach, other Americans began writing tanka and tanka was taught to schoolchildren.

Circa 1970 the first organization for English-speaking tanka poets was founded: the Tanka Chapter of the Chaparral Poets of California. The Tanka Chapter published a member anthology in 1975, entitled simply, *Tanka*. In addition to individual tanka, it contains some very short sequences which are probably the oldest sequences published in English. The Tanka Chapter operated for about a decade. Also during this period the first tanka circles were formed in Canada, and the Kisaragi Poem Study Group of Toronto published an anthology called *Maple* (1975). It may have been accompanied by other member anthologies of the same name in 1972 and 1978. The first efforts at historiography also began during the 70s. Tomoe Tana published *Tomoshihi* in tribute to her friend and colleague, Lucille Nixon, in 1978. Later, in 1985, she wrote her master's thesis on the subject of *The history of Japanese tanka poetry in America* (San José State University).

During the 1950s and 60s, haiku became popular in the West, and some haiku poets encountered tanka at that time. However, the biggest influx came during the 70s and 80s. With so many haiku enthusiasts bursting upon the field, tanka was rediscovered and reshaped yet again. Tanka was, by definition, 'not haiku,' and the supposed dichotomy between 'objective' haiku and 'subjective' tanka was promulgated. Various theories of tanka-ness were espoused, with the swing line and pivot enjoying a vogue.



During this time tanka absorbed a degree of Romanticism that had not formerly been present in the genre, so much so that for a long time the Romantic assumption dominated the field.

The classical *waka* of Japan, especially that which appeared in the *Kokinwakashū*, and its sequel, the *Shin-Kokinwawashū*, were immensely popular. Saigyō (1118-1190 AD) was the chief Japanese poet admired and imitated. Critics in the twenty-first century have struggled to find a name for this style of poetry, and so it has been called 'Romantic,' 'neo-classical,' 'traditional,' and other terms.

The last thirty years have been particularly prolific; the amount and variety of tanka has expanded steadily. (Cf. 'A History of Tanka Publishing in English'<sup>6</sup> and 'The Labyrinth of Tanka'<sup>7</sup> for more detailed analyses of history and trends in tanka in English.) Starting in 2006, the variety and number of tanka venues has expanded to include journals dedicated to tanka prose, short formal verse in Western and Eastern styles, tanka poetry of place, illustrated tanka, themed anthologies, and more.

## Part Two: Contemporary Tanka

Although the publication of anthologies has become an annual rite, no previous anthology has

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<sup>6</sup> Kei, M. 'A History of Tanka Publishing in English.' *Modern English Tanka* 2:2. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Winter, 2007, pp 198-219.

<sup>7</sup> Kei, M. 'The Labyrinth of Tanka.' *Modern English Tanka* 2:3. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Spring, 2008, pp 208-228.

attempted to systematically survey all tanka published in a given year. The editorial team of *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka*, read over a hundred venues and over fourteen thousand poems published in English to choose the best contemporary tanka. In order to ensure that the field was covered, every editor was assigned to read particular venues but was free to nominate any works in addition to their assigned reading. Approximately two thousand poems were initially offered for consideration, but that number was whittled down to about four hundred after the first cut. In the end, 321 individual tanka were chosen as well as several tanka sequences and tanka prose pieces by a total of 138 authors.

The editorial team did not attempt to define or prescribe tanka; anything that was presented as tanka was read. Editor Bob Lucky described the experience:

I've never read so many tanka in my life. At the end of it, I began to question what a tanka is. I was drowning in trends and themes, some of which intrigued me and some of which drove me to distraction. I despaired over the limitations of the form and simultaneously marveled at what could be accomplished in five lines.

Worthy poems were selected first, then analyzed to see what they had in common and what sort of features they exhibited as compared to the bulk of tanka published in English. This was the reverse of the usual editorial process in

which an editor or team of editors starts out with a goal and seeks poems which fulfill the goal. The diversity of editorial opinion today is creating an increasing number of venues featuring a greater number of treatments; the goal of *Take Five* was to survey and fairly treat *all* tanka published in English. Any anthology that claims to offer the 'best' must review and include various and sometimes contradictory ideas about what constitutes tanka in English. No doubt readers will find choices they agree with as well as some they do not. What is hoped is that the team has done justice to presenting the broad sweep of literature called 'tanka in English.'

The reader will find many examples of formal as well as informal tanka in the pages that follow. Formal tanka adhere to several different formats, such as the classic sanjūichi form of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables (with minor variations), short-long-short-long-long lines (SLSLL), or even 2-3-2-3-3 beats, but the majority of tanka in the book are informal works following no fixed format. This does not mean they are free verse; tanka are bounded in length so that they may be anywhere from five to thirty-five syllables long. The majority fall somewhere in the range of seventeen to twenty-five syllables. Tanka is conventionally formatted on five lines, although this is not a requirement. The editorial team reviewed tanka written on a single line and omitted them, not because of their format, but because they did not reach the highest level of literary merit necessary to be included.

Five lines are a convenient way to present the five poetic phrases that make up a tanka; the vast majority of the poems within the anthology

meet this criteria. A 'poetic phrase' is not a grammatical phrase; while there is no consensus on exactly what a 'poetic phrase' is, it can be described as a 'unit of meaning and prosody.' A poetic phrase may be composed of a single word, a group of words, a grammatical phrase, an image, or a unit of sound. In some cases it is even a visual unit on the page. Items which appear in the same phrase form a coherent and prosodic whole, although this does not rule out the use of fragmentation, disconnection, or syncopation. A phrase must have sufficient strength to stand alone on its line or else perform a critical function in the larger structure of the poem.

Consider André Surridge's tanka:

the old woman  
with a walking stick  
bent over  
her daughter's grave  
like a question mark

The opening phrase, 'the old woman,' tells us the subject of the poem and immediately sketches the outlines of the picture we will see. The 'walking stick' adds a detail that develops further in the line 'bent over.' The image that forms is of a bent and elderly woman like many we have seen. The next phrase, 'her daughter's grave,' transforms this from a stereotype of old age into a portrait of grief; the woman's age is not the burden that bends her — it is the loss of a beloved child. The hunched form of the old woman and the straight staff of the walking stick suggests a question mark, a mark that represents the questions asked by anyone who has ever lost

a loved one. The poem reverberates with the anguish of "Why?"

This is tanka's great power: five phrases are a complex and detailed structure that can be manipulated in hundreds of ways to achieve the poet's goal. Small but powerful, tanka harnesses words to express the inexpressible. Poems that do not have five poetic phrases lack the complexity of structure that enables them to perform the multivalency of meaning that results from interweaving the written and unwritten portions of the poem. Tanka has been continuously published for fourteen hundred years because it is strong and flexible.

A common trend in contemporary tanka today is to divide tanka into 'formal' and 'informal' verse depending on whether the poem adheres to a structure based on counting syllables or a facsimile thereof. Yet a poem can be formatted in either the sanjūichi or SLSLL format without being made up of five poetic phrases; the mere formatting of a short poem on five lines is not sufficient to establish its identity as tanka. Novice poets often make the mistake of padding or enjambling lines for no reason other than to satisfy the syllable count.

Tanka can have a pentafid form without adhering to a fixed form; or rather five poetic phrases *is* the fixed form. To achieve the maximum effect from such a small amount of material the poet must manipulate word choice, word order, the grouping of words, the various large and small structures within the poem, the white space around it, rhythm, sound, caesura, and everything else. It does not tolerate small errors – there is no room for mistake. A new line

cannot be added to make up for a deficient line; adjectives and adverbs cannot be stuffed in to elaborate the image. The level of self-discipline and mastery of language required pushes the tanka poet into a different place than the writer of free verse. Tanka is the extra turn of the screw.

The poem by Robidoux below might be mistaken for free verse, but even a casual look reveals its pentapartite structure.

I could tell  
from the look in her eyes  
the cancer had spread  
from her lungs to her liver  
and into both our lives

Barbara Robidoux

The poem subdivides into three strophes: I could tell from the look in her eyes / the cancer had spread from her lungs to her liver / and into both our lives. The first is short, the second long, and the third short; thus the alternating rhythm that is a hallmark of tanka is present in the larger structures of the poem. It also conforms to the classical use of strophe, antistrophe, and epode. In ancient Greece, the first strophe was sung by the chorus as it moved across the stage, the antistrophe as it reversed direction, and the epode as the chorus returned to center. The same emotional movements are present in this tanka. Just as the Greek chorus stops dead center for the epode, so, too, is the reader stopped dead center by the final line.

only a one sentence  
rebuke  
to my kid  
and all day  
the lousy after-taste

Sanford Goldstein

Poet Sanford Goldstein's tanka is indelibly stamped with the truth he lives. He avoids sugarcoating and records episodes that other poets never dare to put into words. Editor Kala Ramesh says, "How well Goldstein has crafted it. Exquisite! Line one is long, then short lines, each word folding into the other, until in the last line, I shuddered with that 'lousy after-taste.'" Robidoux and Goldstein both reach deep into their respective traditions to create thoroughly modern poems.

Tanka often divide into two strophes composed of *kami-no-ku*, or upper verse (first three lines) and the *shimo-no-ku*, or lower verse (last two lines). The informed reader will recognize that the *kami-no-ku* was broken off to form the haiku of 5-7-5 syllables. The West is so familiar with haiku that the structural division of *kami-no-ku* and *shimo-no-ku* appears to be the normal and everlasting structure of tanka. Well-meaning teachers advise students to write a haiku and tack on two lines of subjective response. To simplify tanka in this way skims over history, ignores evolution, and closes off the luxuriant possibilities of the five phrase form.

Still, many good tanka have been written in the form and it continues to be popular.

rare is it  
for me to think of my father  
in any kind way—  
he sat in his favorite chair  
as if the trap of age had sprung

Sanford Goldstein

Goldstein offers us three lines of subjective response followed by two lines of imagery, all dripping with an emotion that does not need explication for us to imagine what might have passed between him and his father. Such autobiographical works are a hallmark of Goldstein's style, and many poets have heeded his admonition (repeated from Takuboku) that tanka is a diary of the emotional life of the poet. Autobiographical poems are so common in contemporary tanka that it requires a conscious effort to remember that poetry may be edited or even a complete fabrication, or that it may address entirely different subjects.

a man and boy  
arguing as they load stone  
onto a donkey's back,  
the pyramids behind them  
rising tall in the thistles

Michael McClintock

History is generally thought to be too large a subject to be tackled by a form as small as tanka;



likewise, the didactic and political nature of history is often thought to be contrary to the intimacy of tanka. Yet anything is a legitimate subject for tanka. McClintock presents a scene that is sharp and ambiguous, foreign, and very much at home. A man and boy loading a donkey and arguing in Eternal Egypt cannot be truly different from a father and son of any nationality arguing as they load a truck; McClintock has foregrounded the universality of human experience against an exotic backdrop. This time it is the pyramids that are dwarfed while ordinary human beings loom large.

I am  
I am not  
I am  
as I walk in & out  
of mist

A. A. Marcoff

A minimalist tanka, it varies only slightly from the classic short-long-short-long-long pattern, as well as dividing neatly into a 3 / 2 line structure. Zen-like in its simplicity, it shows that autobiographical moments are not necessarily limited to the internal world. Was the poet simply walking through patches of fog? Or was he deliberately playing with the mist, stepping in and out of it to see what couldn't be seen? The reader may view fog differently the next time he or she sees it.

Ancient tanka were often built on a structure of 5-7 / 5-7-7. The first two lines were a preface containing a place name, stock phrase or poetic

epithet that provided an imagistic introduction to the lower three lines.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the first two lines could be discarded and the remainder made a complete and coherent poetic statement. This does not mean that the first two lines were unimportant, but it does reverse our contemporary notion that the first three lines are the most important and the last two are an addendum.

and when  
the sand runs out?  
the stillness  
of the hourglass  
and I are one

Denis M. Garrison

If the first two lines of Garrison's poem are omitted, what remains is a complete poetic thought, "the stillness of the hourglass and I are one." The sands of time running out are a stock image in Western literature, but the lines are not disposable. They prepare us for the body of the poem. Garrison has inserted an unexpected turn between the upper strophe and the lower; where the conventions of the West lead us to expect a homily about the fleeting nature of time, pleasure, glory, et cetera, Garrison's embrace of stillness is an unexpected surprise.

The break may be placed anywhere from the end of line one to the end of line four; the break can even come mid-line. There can be three or

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<sup>8</sup> Other forms were also used, *cf.* *A Waka Anthology, Vol 1*, edited and translated by Edwin Cranston.

four, even five breaks, as is in the case of the 'list' tanka in which various elements of a list are collated together in a poem.

narrow layers  
of an ancient lakebed  
visible  
on the sheer rock wall  
I finger-walk back through time

David Rice

Rice's poem divides into a 4 / 1 line format in which the first four lines give us the sensation of falling down the face of a cliff, but the fifth line zooms into a close-up view of someone doing what we have all done: walking our fingers over a surface. The content and form match one another; the grand impersonality of the cliff is translated into an intimate connection with the scope of time.

that final spring  
we were together flying  
our kite—until  
you let loose the string  
and heart from soul divided

an'ya

an'ya uses a kite to link the internal and external worlds. The caesura comes at the exact middle of the poem; the em dash cleanly divides the poem into 'before' and 'after' in a way that no word could do. Only the blankness of a punctuation

mark can sever the two parts of the poem while simultaneously joining them.

autumn in Paris . . .  
after leaving the bookstore  
loved by Hemingway  
i write a poem on a leaf  
for the river to read

Jeanne Emrich

Emrich's 'autumn in Paris' does not adhere to formal expectations, but it is still a lyrical work. Editor Patricia Prime says, "The musical quality of tanka is epitomized in this poem by its choice of rhythm, line length, and words [ . . .] In a few simple words, Jeanne Emrich sums up for us the joy of being in Paris in autumn when the leaves are changing colour."

how tenderly  
he delivers the eulogy  
and kisses the forehead  
of the wife  
he cheated on

Aurora Antonovic

Tanka can even be written in a 'rush of five lines down.' Indeed, *Five Lines Down* was the name of a landmark tanka journal of the 1990s edited by Sanford Goldstein and Kenneth Tanemura, and 'five lines down' has established itself as a stock phrase signifying 'tanka' in the poetic language of our genre. The structure lends itself well to an outpouring of emotion, but

Antonovic has delivered a more measured and ironic view. Editor Sanford Goldstein says, "I find Aurora Antonovic's tanka very sharp and realistic . . . [it] emphasizes the human condition, the masks we have to put on so often in life, but then the truth will out, a dramatic unexpected ending."

The importance of the five-part structure is so great that an editor would be justified in rejecting a poem without it. However, a handful of poems that we accept as tanka contain greater or fewer, or else call into question what we mean when we say 'poetic phrase.'

plucking out  
another gray hair . . .  
i sign up for  
inner goddess  
dancing

Pamela A. Babusci

this past August,  
all at once, the abuse of a decade  
condensed into a bullet—  
    there's a house for sale  
    in our neighborhood

Larry Kimmel

Does Babusci's use of 'dancing' on a line by itself qualify a 'poetic phrase?' Does Kimmel's condensation of the two grammatical phrases 'all at once, the abuse of a decade' into a single line also qualify as a 'poetic phrase?' Does Babusci say

too little? Does Kimmel say too much? Yet neither poem can be changed without damaging them. Each poem is excellent as it stands, and they are accepted by the editorial team as examples of the infinite variety and flexibility of tanka in English.

Indeed, flexibility in format is the key difference between tanka in English and Japanese. By adhering to a fixed format, Japanese tanka provide for almost infinite content, whereas English tanka, by selecting content and approach as significant definers of the form, have restricted content and permitted plasticity in format.

Tanka in English must define itself not only in the context of its Japanese origin, but also and especially in the context of Western literature. It is not enough for tanka to demonstrate its connections to Japanese roots; it must compete with other Western forms for the attention and appreciation of an English-speaking audience. Tanka is a newcomer in the garden and must adapt if it is going to survive as anything more than a hothouse exotic. In short, tanka must become a vernacular poetic form in English. The poems chosen for *Take Five* show that the process of acclimatization is well under way.

One of the key criticisms of the sanjūichi form is that such poems say too much. When well written they are complete unto themselves and leave little room for the reader's participation. When poorly written they muddle too many images and ideas together. Because of differences between Japanese and English, to obtain the necessary compaction and lightness, a poem must usually be about 19-23 syllables. Yet

sometimes thirty-one syllables is exactly the right length.

Consider William Hart's tanka:

a rooster on a leg string  
stands at the end of his world  
daring traffic—  
even a chicken feels  
the pinch of a tethered life

The five poetic phrases that are the central definition of tanka are obvious, the imagery is clear and vivid, and the similarity of the chicken to ourselves is an electric spark that jumps into the heart. Who has not felt what this chicken has felt?

Editor Bob Lucky remarked about this poem, "And that is one of the beauties of tanka, that any poet at any given moment can make that moment uniquely his or her own and yet present it in a way that the reader feels it is his or hers."

C. W. Hawes' sanjūichi tanka joins mastery of form with a subject matter rarely broached in tanka. Not only that, but the swing line on line three divides the poem into an upper and lower verse, each of which is complete in itself but which join together to make a greater whole.

blood-soaked the bodies  
littering the marketplace  
this hot afternoon  
one melon and a small child  
not hit by flying shrapnel

Hawes demonstrates that the poet need not intrude himself into the poem to create a highly subjective work out of an apparently objective presentation. Overt commentary would not enhance the poem. Tanka poetry is like a snapshot – messing around with special effects in Photoshop may make for an interesting presentation but does not increase the value of the underlying image. The same is true of tanka; in such a small form it is essential that the poet begin with strong material and use the literary tools which serve it best.

At the other extreme are minimalist tanka. Although it is difficult when working with less than seventeen syllables, minimalist tanka can show the characteristic features we expect in more full-bodied tanka. The following minimalist tanka by Jim Kacian, well-known editor of the Red Moon haiku anthology series, is not a haiku.

suddenly  
sunlint  
sparrows  
suddenly  
gone

Jim Kacian

The rhythm, repetition, and pentafid structure is clearly tanka, albeit tanka stripped down to its most minimal form. There are other examples of minimalist tanka in the anthology.

not speaking  
to each other



the cherry tree  
still  
blossoms

David Gross

Gross has inserted a line break instead of a punctuation mark to create the caesura, another manipulation of the poetic space common in English but absent from the Japanese. English grammar is more dependent on word order and punctuation; thus creative use of the visual space is needed to achieve the same degree of flexibility as in Japanese.

The majority of the poems in *Take Five* fall somewhere between the full-bodied sanjūichi and the minimalist tanka. Most tanka published in English fall somewhere in the range of seventeen to twenty-six syllables. In each case the poet uses as many words as necessary to convey the message; judicious use of word choice and image gives tanka its expressive power and suppleness.

still held  
by the sound  
of a shakuhachi flute  
I walk out into the wind  
with holes in my bones

Peter Yovu

Yovu's tanka won first place in the Saigyō Awards for 2008; there is no doubt why. The striking imagery is nearly impossible to explain but keenly felt; Yovu has succeeded in capturing a highly

subjective moment with concrete language that borders on the surreal.

in foster care  
I never wept  
just silently bore  
my fate like a parcel  
too heavy to carry

Aurora Antonovic

Editor Pamela A. Babusci says, "This tanka is flawless in its construction and depth of meaning. The reader can feel the profound sadness of a child in foster care and how her pain, although overwhelming, must be kept a secret. She carries this burden in her heart, abandonment of her soul, in solitude, in the recesses of her days and nights."

In Japan, anything would be accepted as tanka as long as it adhered to the sanjūichi format, but this is not the case in English. Subject and treatment matter, which in turn gives rise to the concept of 'tanka spirit' as the defining principle of tanka. Never adequately explained, 'tanka spirit' is perhaps defined by what it leaves out (war, politics, crime) rather than by what it includes (love, nature, personal life).

That makes Stevenson's poem rare and admirable:

the unknown man  
who stared down the tanks—  
we love him

and also the one  
who pulled him aside

John Stevenson

The photograph that inspired this poem is known the world over, yet the man's identity and his fate are both unknown. Stevenson assumes that concerned bystanders pulled him away, but other people think he was grabbed by Chinese security forces and executed. Stevenson has succeeded in summing up the complicated hopes and fears this anonymous act of courage symbolizes for all of us. A more literary treatment would not do justice to the moment.

hot august  
an open fire hydrant  
flushes out  
the whole under-ten  
neighborhood

Art Stein

Poems don't need to treat epic subjects to benefit from an unembellished style. The judicious choice of words and image is everything. In Stein's poem twenty syllables is sufficient to conjure a street full of spraying water and shrieking children. He could have laden it with color and adjective, but it was not necessary.

in the deep silence  
of scorching midday heat,  
my mother's spine

remembers  
our wartime defeat

Mariko Kitakubo

Although there was no conscious decision on the part of the editorial team, the selections in *Take Five* exhibit a bias against tanka that imitate classical Japanese tanka and insulate against the hard realities of the modern world. The rule of good taste that governed the medieval classics excluded topics such as war, natural disasters and crime, but everything is a legitimate topic for contemporary tanka.

It may be that dying  
is a little like leaving Venice:  
all this confusion  
and worry about catching a train  
that is only going to Bologna.

Jim Moore

In the end, all the fuss about contemporary tanka in English may only be confusion and worry about a train that is "only going to Bologna," but the ride is worth the price of the ticket.

-K-

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