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Substructure in Tanka: The Strophe, Line, and Poetic Phrase

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In discussing tanka, it is necessary to define what we mean by different terms, and that poses certain problems when discussing substructures within the form. ‘Verse’ is usually used to mean the whole stanza, or an individual line, so ‘verse’ is too confusing to use in tanka. Tanka have three levels of structure: the poetic phrase, what I call the ‘strophe’, and the poem itself. For our purposes, a strophe is one or more lines grouped together to form a substructure within the tanka. Strophes may be of different lengths, but they form a coherent unit of prosody and meaning.

Notice that ‘sentence’ and ‘clause’ are not structures in tanka; tanka may possess formal grammar or they may not. Sentences and clauses may make up a line, strophe, or the entire poem, or they may be subdivided in various ways.

Likewise the ‘line,’ although often referenced in tanka, is not exactly how Japanese tanka are structured. Tanka are made up of five parts which in Japanese are usually written on one line, but sometimes two or three, or wherever the calligrapher finds convenient to break the poem. Most Westerners are so accustomed to the line as a unit of poetry that many, maybe even most, tanka in English depend upon the line as a unit of organization. Skilled poets can create a complex interplay of Western and English structures to enrich their tanka. Thus ‘line’ is a useful concept for interpreting tanka written in English, but not in Japanese.

This raises the question of whether enjambment is a legitimate technique in tanka. It is, although it is often seen in poems whose author knows only that tanka consists of a certain number of syllables per line. Such a simplistic understanding ignores the Japanese structure of five poetic parts that makes up tanka: A single run-on sentence can be perfectly formatted to fit the sanjuichi structure of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, but that doesn’t make it a tanka. The question is, how are the parts arranged? The rhythm and relationships created by the interaction of the five fundamental units is the defining feature of tanka. It is why tanka is a formal form and not simply five lines of free verse.

I shall use the term ‘poetic phrase,’ or just ‘phrase,’ to refer to one of these five fundamental units of tanka structure. A ‘phrase’ in tanka is the smallest unit of prosody and meaning. It may be a word, clause, fragment, sentence, or any combination thereof. A phrase might even be made of a punctuation mark (rare) or several sentences (also rare).

The question is, what are the substructures that make the tanka work? This is a difficult analysis for a reader not familiar with the conventions of tanka. It is also why tanka appear deceptively simple to the neophyte. Not until a person sits down to try and write them do they discover how difficult it is.

Western terminology often fails to capture the element under discussion, so a variety of Japanese terms have been adopted into English to discuss tanka. Where no good English equivalent is available, or where the connotations are distinctly different, I will use the Japanese. For example, the *mono no aware* is a *memento mori*, but the connotations are different. The former invokes a pleasurable sadness or appreciation of perishable beauty, the latter is an omen of impending death casting its shadow over the pleasures of the world. The Christian who believes in eternal damnation for his sins views death quite differently from the Buddhist who believes he will be reincarnated according to his merits.

To understand the various parts that make up a tanka, let us consider some examples.

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, *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka*, Vol. 1. MET Press, 2009.

Here it is broken into 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

In Robidoux's tanka, L1-2, L3-4, L5 are strophes. This follows the old tanka pattern dating back to the *Man'yōshū*, but also classical Greek plays. Notice the movement: from "I" the speaker, to "her," then back to "us." Left, right, center. You could dance Robidoux's tanka. Move left on the first strophe, right on the second strophe, back to center on the third. In Greek plays, strophes were motions in time to verses; hence 'strophe' refers both to verses and to movements.

Robidoux's tanka is composed of one complete sentence (minus punctuation marks). The reader unfamiliar with tanka conventions might read this simply as a sentence and miss the substructures at work. Notice that L2 and L4 both begin with the word "from". Each of the first two strophes has a parallel structure: a statement that could be a complete sentence on its own (I could tell, the cancer had spread), but followed by a clause that expands it. Each of the clauses contains a reference to "her" and her body parts: her eyes, her lungs, her liver. The third strophe is much shorter and the changed rhythm creates a sense of finality that closes the poem so that we know it's done, but it also creates a sense of doom so that we know that the outcome of the cancer is fatal. The unnamed "her" is dying. Structure is perfectly matched to meaning with the two amplifying each other.

The first strophe begins the action with the self, the "I" that observes, then moves away to the Other that is the subject of the poem, then returns to center with "us." This distinguishes the poem from tanka that are merely observations by starting from a place of apparent separation, only to draw the speaker into the subject's doom. Many novice tanka writers write observations and format them as verses; the use of the authorial "I" is like the photographer's shadow falling into the image. It distances us from the subject. Robidoux's tanka subverts that expectation by dragging the "I" into the action. The "I" of the poem is a passive observer, but as the final line moves into "both our lives," the power of the subject pulls the passive and helpless "I" into it. The inability of "I" to take action or to resist what is happening further enhances the sense of doom. There is nothing that can be done. The poem is over: the death is final. The "I" is incapable of doing anything more than sounding the anguish.

The strophe is not the same as a 'jo,' which I discussed in a previous article.¹ However, a strophe may contain a jo, literally 'preface,' a commonly employed technique in tanka dating back to the earliest tanka of the *Man'yōshū*. The jo usually came at the beginning as its name indicates, but already in the *Man'yōshū* era poets experimented with putting it in different places. The original jo was commonly a two-line strophe (L1-2), with the body of the poem being placed on L3-5. This is related to the choka in which an unlimited number of couplets could precede the three-line ending.

¹ 'Tanka Structure: The 'Jo' or 'Preface'. *Atlas Poetica* 13. Autumn, 2012.

First, a tanka with a conventional jo forming the first strophe:

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

Art Stein, *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka*, Vol. 1. MET Press, 2009.

hot august

an open fire hydrant
flushes out
the whole under-ten
neighbourhood

L1, “hot august,” is a conventional jo—it gives some basic information. In Japanese tanka, the jo frequently contained a conventional epithet about a place or other subject. We see the same here; “hot august” is a conventional statement that is not original to the author, but it provides useful information that sets the scene for the strophe to come. If the jo is omitted, the remaining body still forms a coherent unit of prosody and meaning. In order to be a jo, it must be fungible; that which cannot be changed without changing the meaning of the poem is the body. For example, if “hot August” is changed to “on a summer’s day,” the meaning does not change. Both are conventional statements that serve to set the stage for what is to come.

L2–5 is a single strophe. It contains two substructures within it (L2–3 and L4–5). The substructures are units of prosody and meaning, but not coherent on their own. They require each other to create a complete strophe. Each of these substructures is composed of two phrases. The component parts are set up in parallel to one another. To recap, the four line body is one strophe made up of two substructures, each of which is made up of two phrases forming a coherent whole, and introduced by a classical jo.

Next, a poem in which the first two lines appear to be a jo, but are not:

our white cat
gone seven years
and still
her light
in every room

Alexis Rotella, *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka*, Vol. 1. MET Press, 2009.

our white cat
gone seven years

and still

her light
in every room

L1–2 are the body of the poem. Without L1–2, the rest of the poem makes no sense. Since L1–2 are essential to comprehending the poem, they are not a jo. (Compare with Art Stein’s tanka above.) This is also a reminder that while a jo often contains an image, not all images are jo.

L1 creates a clear image of a white cat that fades into a ghostly presence when we learn it is “gone seven years.” The image is clear, but the emotional content is not yet revealed. We don’t know if this will be an amusing anecdote, a threnody over the loss of a beloved pet, or something else. This is especially the case with a poet as diverse as Alexis Rotella. She writes humorous kyōka on the subject of death as well as human foibles, so there’s no knowing what is coming until it’s read.

L3 “and still” is composed of two words that do not usually merit being placed on a line by themselves, but in this case, they perform the valuable function of subdividing the poem into three strophes while prolonging the suspense and heightening anticipation. The fulcrum on which the first and third strophes balance is L3; its neutrality slips from our awareness and leaves the first and third strophes in perfect balance.

The jo can be used to subdivide a tanka into a wide variety of patterns. The courtiers of the *Man’yōshū* era started this experimentation, and anglophone poets have continued to diversify the jo. By understanding what a jo is, we are better able to recognize the strophes that make up a tanka. However, that means we must also be prepared for unusual uses of the jo and complex structures.

The next tanka divides the jo itself:

it glides towards me
as I sit at the harbor
in our time apart
trying not to think of you –
the sailboat without a sail

Thelma Mariano, *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Keibooks, 2006.

it glides towards me

as I sit at the harbor
in our time apart
trying not to think of you –

the sailboat without a sail

In this case, L1 and L5 form the jo and are a single strophe that has been split by placing the body squarely in the middle. Splitting the jo into two parts echoes the narrator’s separation from “you.” A lesser poet would have kept “it glides towards me” and “the sailboat without a sail” together. Formatting the sailboat so that it approaches the narrator, then disappears from the body of the poem, only to reappear at the end without a sail, replicates the circumstances of the narrator’s relationship. Splitting a jo was not done in the old Japanese poems, but in Mariano’s hands is highly effective.

Next we have a poem with three jo and four strophes:

cold wind
divorce papers served
the bottom falling out
of a distant cloud
rain shower

susan delphine delaney, *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Keibooks, 2006.

cold wind

divorce papers served

the bottom falling out
of a distant cloud

rain shower

L1's "cold wind" is a conventional jo that introduces "divorce papers served." The image sets the mood for the body. The body, however, is very brief. It occupies L2 only. L3–4 are a second jo that provide an extension of the first jo, and L5 is yet another jo, piling up yet another weather image. The stacking of multiple jo is like a stack of bricks falling on the narrator's head. Each chilly wet weather image intensifies the misery of the poem while providing clues as to the probable sequence of events. The strength of the body is such that it is able to support the unusual asymmetric trio of jo.

Unlike in the previous poem, each jo is an independent strophe, not the divided parts of a single strophe. The fragmenting of the poem into multiple small but meaningful units echoes the emotional fragmentation of the narrator.

As we have seen, the jo is a common and valuable technique in tanka, but tanka can be written very well without it.

her skirt brightens
in the sunlight at the door—
quick! quick!
her scissor shadow
cuts me through

Larry Kimmel, *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Keibooks, 2006.

her skirt brightens
in the sunlight at the door—

quick! quick!

her scissor shadow
cuts me through

Kimmel's tanka is composed of three strophes: L1–2, L3, and L4–5. Omitting L3, we have a sequence of actions in which a woman's skirt appears in the doorway and the shadow of her legs limned by the sun evokes a strong reaction in the narrator. As strong as the action is, it isn't complete without L3. The double imperative divides the first and third strophes from each other, and sets up a swift rhythm like a pair of scissors swiftly snipping, or a racing heart. It is L3 that gives the poem its sense of movement as well as enhancing the reaction to the experience.

L3 is a pair of sentences. Each imperative sentence is only one word long, and the lack of capitals de-emphasizes the importance of the sentence as a structure, but they're still sentences. The poet has omitted capitals and most punctuation within the poem to subvert English grammar; thus we read the two sentences of L3 as a single strophe, not as a pair of short strophes.

Consider the poem with correct capitalization and punctuation. The poem loses energy and subtlety:

Her skirt brightens
in the sunlight at the door—
Quick! Quick!
Her scissor shadow
cuts me through.

The doubled action of L3 is essential to keep the poem moving and to unify its various parts. Grammatically correct capitalization would have put too much weight on it, slowing down the movement and dulling the sensation of a racing heart. “Quick!” would not suffice; the double “quick! quick!” sets up three parallel pairs: two legs, two blades of scissors, two exclamations. It also puts each strophe into parallel form: all three strophes are made up of two parts of equal weight. Nonetheless, the de-emphasis of English grammar lets us read L3 as a single strophe, rather than emphasizing the pair of parts. Our ear hears the music even if we don’t consciously register why.

Larry Kimmel is a master of complex structures within tanka. He is equally adroit at exploiting both Japanese and Western units of construction.

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, *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka*, Vol. 1. MET Press, 2009.

this past August,

all at once, the abuse of a decade
condensed into a bullet—

 there’s a house for sale
 in our neighborhood

L1 is a conventional jo that sets the scene and raises the temperature for what is to come. L2–5 is a sequence of events that forms the body of the poem. That body is divided into two strophes. Each strophe is strong enough to stand on its own, but they require each other to complete the tanka. Each of these strophes is built of different parts. L2–3 is composed of the clause “all at once” that belongs to the sentence “the abuse of a decade condensed into a bullet”. L4–5 is the second strophe, “there’s a house for sale / in our neighborhood.” Each strophe is a coherent unit of meaning and prosody.

The second strophe opens with “all at once” and closes with an em dash—two markers setting off the action of the sentence with indicators of speed. The enjambment at the end of L2 imposes a small hesitation as the trigger is squeezed, then the bullet is fired on L3. The opening and closing of this strophe resembles the lines graphic artists use to generate the sensation of speed.

The third strophe on L4–5 is indented to abruptly transition to a different topic, a topic that by its juxtaposition is clearly related to and the result of the action in the second strophe. Very often poets with less skill than Kimmel use indentations and other spacings to create a sense of structure where one is lacking. In Kimmel’s tanka, it is the innate rhythm and structure of the poem that creates the format, not the other way around.

Reading tanka successfully means being able to follow the Japanese system of structure as opposed to the Western. This is one of many reasons why a tanka is not simply a five-line free verse. It is also why so many tanka poets omit standard punctuation and capitals; they have intuitively grasped that including standard English grammar would obscure the Japanese system at work. Only a handful of tanka poets, such as Alexis Rotella and Denis Garrison, use conventional punctuation and capitalization, and they do so deliberately as they harness English grammar in support of their structures.

Poets who are developing their craft should focus on building structure into their words so they will not be at the mercy of the typesetter. It has happened more than once that a typesetter unfamiliar with tanka has set them all flush left, sometimes even on four lines! If the poem loses its structure and cohesion due to a typesetter's error, then it was weak to begin with. Kimmel's poem does not lose anything by being set flush left; the structure is inherent to the poem.

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

Even more complex structures can be created by varying line length and placement. The use of hypometric and hypermetric lines is acceptable in anglophone tanka and is a reflection of the fact that the English syllable is not the same as the Japanese sound unit. For example, the English word "stretched" is only one English syllable, but seven Japanese sound units: s-t-re-t-ch-e-d. If we count it as one syllable, we wind up with a line far longer than the Japanese. Furthermore, Japanese sound units are much less variable in length and form than English syllables. For example, "radio diva" is five syllables, but consumes about the same amount of time to say and space to write as "stretched." Some critics have gone as far as suggesting English writers stick to one and two syllable words. While simplicity in language is a desirable feature, the right word is the word that works, regardless of length.

Against the door dead leaves are falling;
On your window the cobwebs are black.
Today, I linger alone.

The foot-step?
A passer-by.

Jun Fujita, *Tanka: Poems in Exile*. Chicago: Covici-McGee Co., 1923.

Fujita's tanka contains three strophes with two jo, L1-2 and L4-5. The body of the poem is a short L3. The inclusion of a personal pronoun on L2 blurs, but does not erase, the distinction between the first jo and the body. Deciding how to interpret the structures in this complex tanka is fraught with problems. The hypermetric length of L1 and L2 suggests interpreting them as single units in themselves, but the two are clearly related to one another and make a complete scene. It is apparent that the door and the window belong to the same house. The use of the semi-colon tells us that we are to read the two lines together as a single strophe even if they grammatically form two sentences.

We have already learned not to suffer the tyranny of English grammar, but the scrupulous use of punctuation and capitalization in this poem requires us to examine it. When we do so, we note careful structures set up to create units of prosody and meaning. English grammar cannot be discarded in interpreting this tanka, even though it was written by a Japanese American poet.

L3 is the body of the poem. Although it fits with L4–5 as a coherent series of actions, the blank line separating the two shows that the poet did not intend us to read them that way. If the gap were closed, the poet’s intended structure would not be as clear, which is a flaw, but it is a small one, since the intended structure is still discernible.

Divided into its strophes, it is:

Against the door dead leaves are falling;
On your window the cobwebs are black.

Today, I linger alone.

The foot-step?
A passer-by.

The hypermetric first strophe serves to extend the subjective experience of the narrator’s waiting. The reader knows the narrator has been waiting a very long time just from this. Then, the two short lines of the third strophe simulate the quickening of the poet’s pulse when he hears someone approaching. Anticipation swiftly turns to disappointment as the passer-by is no one that interests the narrator.

In between, L3, the body of the poem, reports the narrator’s problem, “I linger alone.” The use of the word “today” makes it clear that he was not always alone. It also indicates that in spite of how long he’s been waiting, he hopes that it will soon be over. Thus the use of the word “today” implies that this is not the first time he’s been disappointed, just as it is not the first day he’s been waiting.

The five poetic phrases that make up the poem are clear. In spite of the highly variable line length, irregular ‘upside down’ structure, and conventional English grammar, each line is a unit of prosody and meaning. In other words, each line is a ‘phrase,’ in the tanka meaning of the word. The varying length of the lines serves the meaning and rhythm.

As mentioned previously, enjambment is a legitimate technique for tanka, although it is most frequently encountered in the work of novice poets who are counting syllables. Sometimes, however, the tanka form is adopted by skilled poets from other traditions who make something very different of it. This is most noticeable in the work of African American tanka poets going back to the Harlem Renaissance. Today, the Black poet who has had the greatest influence on other Black tanka poets is Sonia Sanchez.

Sanchez’s work is heavily enjambed to make her thirty-one syllables fit the sanjuichi form. Unlike amateur poets, Sanchez has a superb command of image and line. Her line breaks are not forced to fit the pattern, instead the pattern is melded with her language.

i kneel down like a
collector of jewels before
you. i am singing
one long necklace of love my
mouth a sapphire of grapes.

Sonia Sanchez, *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press, 1999.

If we reformat Sanchez’s work, we can see that she has intuitively grasped the five part structure of tanka:

i kneel down like
a collector of jewels before you
i am singing

one long necklace of love
my mouth a sapphire of grapes

The lyricism and richly sensual imagery are very suitable for tanka. Tanka as a genre has a long history of love poetry, and Sanchez's work fits very well in that tradition. Her imagery is striking, erotic, and powerful.

But Sanchez didn't give us a tanka in which the lines correspond to the poetic phrases. She enjambed her work. With a poet of Sanchez's stature, we can be certain that she did it on purpose.

i kneel down like a
collector of jewels before
you.

i am singing
one long necklace of love my
mouth a sapphire of grapes.

Sanchez's poem divides into two nearly equal strophes with the break coming on L3 after the word "you." This mid-line caesura is uncommon, but not unknown in tanka. The line breaks placed after the word "a" at the end of L1 and after the "before" on L2 create a hesitation that strengthens the usual pause for line breaks. This in turn puts greater emphasis on the first word of the following lines, "collector" and "you" and enhances the erotic appeal.

Whatever image was evoked in the reader's mind by "kneel down," it was probably not "collector of jewels." Her unusual choice of image surprises us, and she will keep surprising us with her line breaks and word choices. (What is a "sapphire of grapes?")

Now that we have been introduced to the "collector of jewels," we can't help imagining an act of oral sex with the poet kneeling before a man. The position is often seen as submissive, even degraded, but the poet puts herself in the active role as a "collector of jewels." The "you" is not capitalized, reducing its importance even though its position first on L3 emphasizes its importance. In this tanka, a powerful woman is sexually in charge, even when she takes a position conventionally interpreted as submissive.

The mood is worshipful as she sings in the second strophe. Again the unusual imagery, "a necklace of love" and a "sapphire of grapes" startle with their vividness and provide a graceful depiction of something usually interpreted as crude or lewd. Specifically, the act of a male ejaculating on a woman's breasts is often called a "pearl necklace." The "necklace" and the narrator's kneeling position suggest that reading, but the "sapphire of grapes" subverts it. Once again the line break after "my" creates a hesitation that warns us L5 is not going to be what we expect. Furthermore, the placement of "my" at the end of L4 draws attention to it and reinforces the narrator's control over both the male subject and the reader's expectations.

Opening L5 with "mouth" draws us back to "singing." The narrator is singing her song to her lover, and the poet is singing her poem to the reader. "Mouth" supports an erotic interpretation, especially given the previous images. It is a teasing, powerful, love song by a woman in full command of herself both sexually and as a poet. That she depicts her mouth as a jewel is a sign of her confidence, but why sapphire? The usual metaphors for a mouth depend on the colors red and pink. Blue is probably not even a reference to lipstick, although lipstick these days can be of any color. "Sapphire" and "grapes" together suggest a bluish purple that might be intended to represent the skin color of an African American, in this case, flushed with lust. If so, then "sapphire" is a symbol for lips. Grapes, with their plump, juicy shape and their long association with eroticism, further this interpretation.

This beautiful and complicated poem presents us with another choice: Do we try to analyze it in order to make sense of it? Or do we let it be and let the sounds and images wash over us and take us into a

blissful reverie of erotic possibilities? If we are simply readers, then the latter is sufficient. Enjoy the poem for its own sake. But if we are thoughtful critics who want to understand why the poem works, we must let its structure guide us to understand what it is. When analyzing amateur poets we can never be sure we are finding what the poet intended, but when analyzing the work of one of the notable American poets of our time, we must assume every choice is a purposeful one.

Sanchez has been cited by Matsukaze and other African American poets as a powerful influence on their work. We can see it in the tanka below.

grasp him by the ears
listen to the rust-colored
song sailing through his
apricot veins . . . he must be
the one to capture my soul

Orestes (now writing as Matsukaze), *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Keibooks, 2006.

The enjambment and striking imagery follow in Sanchez's footsteps, yet the imitation is imperfect. Although "song" is an unexpected word to follow "rust-colored", the hesitation induced by the line break does not strengthen the word "song." That in turn means the break after "his" on L3 is not as strong as it would have been if "song" had been placed at the end of L2.

Matsukaze has mimicked Sanchez's break after "my" with a similar intent; it enhances the importance of the "he" who is the subject of the poem. Yet Sanchez nowhere stated the subject of her song; it is the reader's interpretation that makes it what it is. Matsukaze, however, makes it clear to us that he is singing to a beloved man. His poem is much easier to understand and depends upon the originality of description for its literary value.

grasp him by the ears
listen to the rust-colored
song sailing through his
apricot veins . . .

he must be
the one to capture my soul

When we break the tanka into its two substructures, we discover two simple strophes. The adroit manipulation of pause and anticipation we seen in Sanchez's work is absent here. What we have is a jejune work from a promising amateur. (This poem was written over a decade ago and is an early work from Matsukaze.) The vivid imagery and the unabashed eroticism set him aside from other amateurs during their apprenticeship.

As important as it is to study and even imitate admired poets during the learning process, eventually the poet must master his medium. We see that growth in Matsukaze's later work:

in midsummer heat i cannot remain at home quiet and cloistered your betrayal loud

Matsukaze, *Bright Stars* 7. Keibooks, 2014.

Matsukaze's recent work is well informed by extensive study. He is particularly interested in alternate lineation in tanka. The one-line tanka above with a complete lack of capitals and punctuation offers us a challenge: can we find the five parts that make up tanka?

in midsummer heat
i cannot remain
at home
quiet and cloistered
your betrayal loud

The five poetic phrases that make up the tanka are obvious. The structures within this tanka are a good deal more complex than his early work.

in midsummer heat

i cannot remain
at home
quiet and cloistered

your betrayal loud

When the poem is divided into its three strophes, its structure is clear. “In midsummer heat” is a one line *jo* with the body divided into two strophes spread over L2–5. “Quiet and cloistered” belongs with the middle strophe because L2–4 form a unit of prosody and meaning. The implied commas before and after the phrase may seem to indicate that it should be a strophe of its own, but it contains insufficient information to qualify as a ‘unit of meaning’ by itself. It is only when grouped with L2–3 that it makes sense.

This is a neatly balanced poem with L1 and L5 being of equal length, but not of equal power. The *jo*, “midsummer heat,” is purely conventional, but it serves to set the tone for what follows. The middle strophe builds the sense of suffocating heat and pressure which is released in the third strophe. Although the narrator doesn’t tell us what betrayal sounds like, the midsummer heat suggests that it may sound like thunder. Usually we prefer a more specific word to give the reader a clearer image, but in this case, the context suggests an appropriate sound without the poet needing to spell it out. The ability of the poet to command the unwritten word is an essential part of what makes a small poem like tanka effective.

Earlier I mentioned that poets should not be afraid of polysyllabic words—the right word is the right word. Here “cloistered” invokes the nun-like virtue of a monogamous wife. This in turn tells us that although the author is male, the narrator is female. The ease with which Matsukaze crosses the gender line is a hallmark of his style, and was present even in his early work.

Returning to the original monotanka, the single line without punctuation creates a sensation of seething anger as words are spit out between clenched teeth. Reading it like this, the voice naturally rises and becomes louder, becoming loudest at the end of the line, aptly on the word “loud.” Prosody and meaning unite and reinforce one another.

This tanka has excellent bones. No matter how it winds up being formatted, it retains its structure. The authorial intent is maintained, no matter what a typesetter does to it.

In the beginning I defined a strophe as one or more lines grouped together to form a substructure within the tanka, but here we must acknowledge that there is no obligation for a strophe to coincide with line breaks. Phrases and strophes, like sentences and grammatical clauses, may all be enjambed in the hands of a skilled poet. The competing systems of Western line and Japanese phrase can be deliberately played off against each other in complex but meaningful ways. We have also seen that tanka can contain substructures that as of yet don’t have a name. When we build up phrases or subdivide strophes, we discover parts of structure that are clearly intentional and effective, but discussing these intermediate structures is outside the scope of this article.

Understanding poetic phrases, how they combine to form strophes, and how we interpret certain common elements that appear in tanka, such as the *jo*, enable us to parse the author's intention. This in turn enhances our appreciation for their artistry. Tanka are far from the simple free verses they appear at first glance; the use of a Japanese system of structure, the subversion of English grammar, and the interplay of Western and Japanese concepts create small poems of great complexity and power.