

Irresistible Constructions: a tanka prose essay

by Patricia Prime

I first began writing tanka prose after I had read the following tanka by Yamabe Akahito in *Love Songs from the Man'yōshū*, Vol. 8, 1426:

The plum blossom
that I thought I would show to my man
cannot be distinguished now
from the falling snow.

I was fascinated by the mystery of the absent lover unable to witness the beauty captured by the poet. I liked the fact that one couldn't distinguish between the colour of plum blossom and snow and that soon the plums would be ripe and bright red. I had been writing tanka for several years but thought I could take the tanka in a different direction entirely by constructing a tanka sequence. Later on came the possibility that the poem could be opened further by linking it with a prose narrative. And so my first tanka prose piece "White & Red" came to be written. As this piece has been published in *Modern English Tanka* Vol. 2 No. 4, Summer 2008 I will not quote it here. <http://www.modernenglishtanka.com/>

After many trials of writing tanka prose in various ways - tanka first, prose later; prose first, tanka later; prose interspersed with tanka - I wrote the following tanka prose, based on a poem I'd written about D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda Weekley (nee von Richthoven). The Gloire de Dijon rose was one of Frieda's favourite flowers and Lawrence likened her breasts with the full-blown glory of the creamy yellow rose:

Gloire de Dijon

I say to you –
that rose I set
by the window
in its vase of crystal
is like a flame

you cannot help
but say – yes
because a bloom
in that pure state
is a work of art

once you say
 those simple words
 I remark
 on its thorns
 and woody stem

where now is its fire?
 as we turn to the rose
 it begins to open
 its scent everywhere
 on the morning breeze

When we see the roses in the half-shade of summer's Parnell Rose Gardens, you say, "What bad luck to bloom and fade so quickly, when bird music can swing so sweetly above the hard-baked clay."

Oh, but that delicious fragrance from the gold, yellow and scarlet flowers. What delightful sounds from tui, bellbird and chaffinch. Shy goose-necked unopened buds press and fold on February's bright morning, shake out crumpled petals and brighten the eye. Roses in profusion. The sound of birdcalls cracks the crickets' tremolo – you'd think the birds had written it – no matter what time of day.

Patricia Prime
 (Unpublished, 2008)

The poem ranges across a number of ideas, but keeps reminding us that longing is a Janus figure; it is a kind of nostalgia, and so looks to the past, and at the same time it is a kind of hope, and so is focussed on the future. But however much it may be alert to the shining moments from a remembered past; it is grounded in the reality of the here and now.

Through Jeffrey Woodward's mentorship in the Tanka Prose Group I discovered the idea of combining tanka with prose was not new; Japanese masters had written tanka prose many years before. The most famous of these being Ki no Tsurayuki, *The Tosa Diary*, Murasaki Shikibi, *Tale of Genji* and Nun Abutsu, *Diary of the Waning Moon*. Indeed, it seems that women dominated this literature in its formative period.

Significance in tanka prose is as much a matter of how a thing is said as it is a matter of what is said. Technical features of a poet's verse are never merely technical: they generate intellectual and emotional meaning, viz. content, which is none the less real through the difficulties it imposes on itself. There is a subtle distinction between haibun and tanka prose. What is that distinction? Haibun is prose that usually contains one or

more haiku, prose “written in the haiku spirit.” Tanka prose is prose that contains one or more tanka, prose “written in the tanka spirit.”

The short poem, or tanka, employing divergent and expansive rhythms, is open to myriad possibilities. This is the case with tanka prose, where nothing is ever quite as it seems, and there is a sense of the mysterious at the heart of the best writing. Even though the work may be very personal, it interweaves numerous threads without ever tying them up, it is not difficult work; in fact it is reader-friendly.

Thus the short poem can be convincingly moved into new and innovative areas. The tanka prose poem can be set in landscape, a landscape of flux, and peopled by those in conflict. Often the reader is able to identify with the writer of the poem, with what he or she has experienced, or the emotions he or she has undergone. The need for permanence, and the unreliability of memory, seems to be what impels writers to record these frequently snapshot poems. In the following fine poem, for example, the combination of solid, dependable, existential words (of hair, forsythia, tulips, and other primary experiences) with enigmatic phrasing (in the final two sentences of the prose section) aims to imply that there are mysteries in the world, mysteries beyond what is palpable or apparent to the senses, mysteries that the poet has plumbed and understood but which are capable of expression only in the challenging turns of language:

Graceful Willow

Sixteen perhaps, auburn hair pulled back tightly in a bun, a trace of cranberry lipstick her mother very likely did not approve. Forsythia aflame and, before the bench by the river where she leans to write, tulips opening. Her elegant and practiced cursive is like that of the current – flowing on and on. She is too young, certainly, to guard many secrets. And her diary – would it possess the patience to receive them?

the willow is green
 young and eager to become
 for wind and water
 the pliable plaything of
 each breath and eddy of spring

Jeffrey Woodward
 (Published in *MET* 6, January 2008)

Each image in tanka prose with or without human figures, feels as though it is producing a story, or the fragment of one. In these poems, something is happening. And if it isn't happening at the moment, it has just happened, or is about to. The reader is brought to the threshold of experience. Every tanka prose piece represents an instant in time,

arrested and acutely realised with the utmost intensity. This may be likened to those moments of epiphany that we find in Joyce or Proust.

These “stories,” however, account for much of the hold the poems have over us – if only we knew how better to read them. The most provocative linger in the memory – as freeze frames lifted from narratives of daily life or experiences, whether these are emotional, artistic, literary, or something else. Isolation, longing, fear, repression, happiness, joy or merely a scene from nature, are all “grist to the mill” for the tanka prose poet.

Stories, novels, plays and narrative poems all by their nature pass through an increasingly complicated storyline towards denouement. Tanka prose, on the other hand, makes the instant permanent, fixing it mid-story. However much the implicit complication, there is little resolution. The poems turn back on themselves, giving them a dreamlike quality.

But being dreamlike isn’t enough. The poem must connect with its reader and strike a sympathetic chord. It cannot feel exclusive to the writer, but should be an occurrence the reader may have experienced for himself or herself or to which he or she can relate in some way. The oddities, the uniqueness of someone else’s experience, may or may not interest us. Indeed, they may seem obscure to us and, if obscure, uninteresting. What compels us as readers and writers are the peculiarities and occurrences of our own lives. And if we can bridge this gap between our own psyche and that of our reader, we will have succeeded.

Most obvious of the strategies we may explore when writing tanka prose is simplification. Images should be shorn of most incidental detail, purged of those objects that, whatever the scene, are ordinarily there. The images should have the quality of being rigorously abstracted, stripped down.

These simplifications, however, should be redolent with suggestion. The unfilled spaces become fields for the play and imagination of the reader. They also imitate memory – especially the distant memories of childhood, those recalled only in barest outline, or in fragments. The mind eliminates so much. Accurately or not, we remember only essentials:

The Cardboard Suitcase

Click of the Box Brownie. In the photo I clutch Mum with one hand; my other holds a toy dog on wheels.

As if it were yesterday, I see Dad in his khaki uniform, shouldering his kit bag as he waves and turns the corner. Mum, back in the kitchen, dissolves in tears when she discovers he’s left his sugar ration lying on the table.

She's waving goodbye to us a short time later. We're on the train with hundreds of other children for evacuation to the Midlands for the duration of the bombing. In my hands a cardboard suitcase and gas mask . . .

out of the dark
 the mournful sound
 of a train whistle –
 the smell of black smoke
 permeates the carriage

the suddenness
 of being alone
 and no-one to care
 a guard comforts me
 with a sticky toffee

standing
 over a puddle
 rainbowed with oil
 I make a wish
 to see mum again

Patricia Prime
 (Unpublished, 2008)

The best tanka prose may seem to possess a tranquillity which the reader can fill from their imagination. Evident as they are, these silences are insufficient in themselves to account for the attraction so many people feel to tanka prose. The quiet matters, but beyond it, there lies something more. In the best poems, the silences seem charged with an almost palpable tension, as we see in the following tanka prose:

Soberanes Point

the smooth white belly
 of a washed-up shark
 exposed and torn
 the light of this day peels back
 and ebbs away with the tide

the very rocks
 that shouldered
 froth and spray
 loom above the water they
 and their jagged shadows

ripples everywhere
 in the fine sand
 repeated ripples
 that echo a last
 wave's retreat

on the saw-like
 teeth of the shark
 on the gaping mouth
 without smile or grimace
 a little lingering light

going barefoot going ghostly over the sand after the heat of yet another brittle day the dark draws near cool and clinging in one whispered breath the Pacific's burden of brine is brooding but familiar and on the winding coast road headlights behind us now and then a beach bonfire before that undertow where no one floats a flame tended by anonymous faces smudged anonymous hands erased by that glow and by the occasional dry spittle of sparks

Jeffrey Woodward
 (Unpublished, 2008)

The tension and mystery are there, the attendant loneliness intense. The musical quality of repetition, assonance, alliteration and the sonic matching of 'clinging,' 'brooding,' and 'winding' is beautifully captured.

Jeffrey Woodward enriches the simple factual statement of his poem by using repetition, a wealth of symbolic suggestiveness that feeds back into all that has gone before. The repetition of "light" and "ripple" invite us into the day where we are going to encounter the "smooth white belly" of the shark. The use of water images "washed-up," "froth and spray" and "wave" focus our attention on their particular selection and enliven our awareness of their connotations.

Uncertainty about the terms that encompass tanka prose and about its hybrid status hovers over the writing of tanka prose. Tanka prose poems partake equally of the tanka and the prose, which may cast the reader into certain uneasiness since the trend is towards prose with haiku, as seen in haibun. The need in tanka prose is to locate its language as poetry, accentuating the difference with the narrative prose of haibun. It takes a strong writer to insist on the poetic prose element of tanka prose. Accomplished tanka prose poets succeed by enjambling the stylistic signs of prose (direct speech, devices of plot, a narrator) with a contrast that is poetry with its images, lines and referential quality. Reading the tanka prose of the best practitioners of the art may feel like crossing unfamiliar territory, but the pieces are great fun to read.

There's a rich and inspiring paradox at the heart of Bob Lucky's tanka prose, a paradox that has nothing to do with the seriousness and importance of his concerns. The tussle with time, with mortality, with the nature of what we call reality, with the ability of words or indeed any art form to express that reality – all of these, however light and humorous the touch, are clearly serious and important concerns. But they are not concerns that set Lucky apart; he is not unique in probing them; he doesn't arrive at insights never thought before. In his writing he denies himself the tones of authority, yet authority (this is the paradox) is precisely what he possesses, an amiable and unthreatening authority, but authority nevertheless. This paradox, of achieving authority by going out of way to disavow any claim to it, is a function of the voice and can be seen in the following poem where, despite growing older and suffering a variety of ailments, he is still moved to passion by the sight of a woman's bare shoulder:

Ignoring Dylan Thomas Sometimes, Sometimes Not

A hip and a shoulder on opposite sides are tightening up, giving me a sort of rolling gait. I stumble into the night splotchy-skinned, the hair on my arms thicker than on my head. Muscle is turning inexorably into flab, except for the heart, which is doubtless hardening with the arteries. My eyes grow dimmer every day, and yet when I see you sleeping there, a strand of hair across your face, the nightgown sliding off your shoulder, I want to hold on a little longer.

late autumn
toppling into a pile
of leaves –
the fragrance of earth
deep in my lungs

Bob Lucky
(Published in *Haibun Today* May, 2008)

Lucky's voice is compounded of rhythms and tones, of comedic register, and of the angles of attitudes taken to subject matter; beneath these, underpinning them all, is the self-image of the poet. Let's look at an exhibit that highlights his poetic stance and his wonderful sense of comedy:

The Grater Things in Life

I'm grating onions for latkes and the tears are streaming down my face and I know that despite my best efforts tears have been falling into the grated onions, and I'm wondering if tears are kosher, especially goy tears, when I hear my wife give a yelp. Our son runs into the kitchen.

“What is it?” he asks.

She shows us the tip of her right thumb and it’s all red and raw where she grated it along with potato. All three of us peer into the bowl but there’s no sign of blood.

“That’s enough,” I say, wiping tears on my shirtsleeves. “Fry this up and we’ll go out for Chinese food later. Hanukkah gelt and fortune cookies for everyone.”

rainy day
 cooking up a pot
 of Japanese curry
 I start to wonder how much
 the directions matter

Bob Lucky
 (Published in *Haibun Today*, March, 2008)

The work of a poet such as Linda Papanicolaou comes from an interesting angle. She is not afraid of prose. Sometimes she structures her pieces as a montage of paragraphs (and in this sense is closer to fiction than poetry). The constellation of paragraphs dissolves the anxiety of interpretation because they are able to be held in the mind at the same time and produce a sublime effect.

Twilight—

*... tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .
 of his rubber-tipped
 walking cane -
 have I a moment
 for a bent old man?*

Wearing discount-store baseball cap and cross-trainers, he comes here often, shuffling up and down the covered walkways between the buildings of the school. This evening, as I lock my classroom door, around the corner he comes. I’m tired and have a long ride home, but I smile and greet him. “How are you?”

Despite the frail translucence of his skin, his cheeks are pink, his blue eyes sparking. “I change times, now walk three times day.” He pauses, then adds with the politesse of studied English, “I am well. How are you?”

*small talk
in a kindergarten
teacher's voice
the gestures, nods and phrases
of a traveler's guide*

I'm not sure how much he understands – nor if he remembers me. Sometimes it's as if I'm in an ongoing dialog that's more soliloquy. I still know little about him.

This evening, he's telling me about walking. Over there, he says, pointing to the low-income apartments where he lives. "Every day walk. Three times. School, cemetery, all round." He maps it on the sidewalk with his cane.

But it's getting dark. An empty school isn't the safest place. What if something happens? Does he have a cell phone?

I tell him, and instantly he stiffens. Lips pursed, quivering, forming words – something he's decided he must say.

It comes first in whole sentences, then phrases and fragments tumbling between pauses, the pauses more eloquent than words themselves: Born in Romania; move to Moscow, school, work, many years; then Ronald Reagan, Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall, and his son, in America, who begs him, come . . .

*rustling
of a parted curtain--
the envelope
with a one-way ticket
he almost dares not open*

*an airplane
in the known world
falls away
and there is only
the promise of a son*

"One stroke, two heart attacks," he proclaims, tapping at his chest. In Romania say, 'God gives, and when He comes He takes. Choose good, bad, change nothing!'"

He looks up, making sure I understand, then giggles. "You good person. I go now."

tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

*the lights
of the V.A. hospital–
biking home
I listen to the tick
tick ticking of my chain*

*what do you know
old man
that I do not?
in pleasantries
the things we leave unsaid*

Linda Papanicolaou
(Unpublished, 2008)

There is still a work of interpretation for the reader here, but the effect is not one of alienation. The reader can choose any of several interpretations of this poem; it does not matter which, it is clear that an image of man and his place in an alien culture is central.

Papanicolaou isn't one to hint that she's fathomed a mystery that no-one else will understand, nor does she suppose that the refusal of transparency can be a virtue. Quite the contrary; all her effort goes into implying that author and readers are a gathering of equal minds confronting the same sort of experiences and thoughts, and she writes in such a way that the movements of intellect and sensibility in her poetry may be readily enacted by the reader.

Many ekphrastic poems are finding their home in tanka prose. One that I like very much is Terra Martin's "Matisse: Woman Before an Aquarium," which consists of two short paragraphs followed by a single tanka:

Matisse: Woman Before an Aquarium

Her cinnamon brown hair is a tidy coiffure; her make up, simple; her blouse, a slinky material with short sleeves. Light through the water reflects and illuminates her face. She gazes at the goldfish bowl, leaning forward – arms crossed, head resting on hands.

A pine cone wreath of russet tones and acicular jade leaves is placed between the fishbowl and white note paper. The rectangular shape of the paper resembles a cheque or a list of things to do. She too is watched.

if nothing else
 the flower of this plant
 once positioned
 will remain in place
 obediently

Terra Martin
 (Published in *Contemporary Haibun Online*,
 June 2008, vol 4 no 2)

Terra Martin sees her task as letting the woman declare her essential character - tidy coiffure, simple make up, heads on hands, contemplative – through her words and rhythms. And she dramatises this encounter between the woman’s world and how we see her. The poem momentarily halted by the tanka. Martin questions the adequacy of human language to articulate the sheer “thisness” of the painting. Two different sets of imagery or areas of experience are simply presented so as to set up a metaphorical relation between them. The poetry emerges from the interplay between the sections. The prose is the verbal equivalent of a still-life painting providing a framework against which the tanka is especially vivid.

The poetic structures by which tanka prose poems perform contain a fulcrum or point of balance: the poem containing two parts which resonate with each other. We encountered it at its simplest in Terra Martin’s poem. Linda Papanicolaou’s poem, on the other hand, is characterised by the way in which the tanka prose can be enhanced and developed by the use of interspersing tanka and prose.

These tanka prose pieces, with their short prose paragraphs, are not montaged together, but often inside the paragraphs or sentences, there is a dreamlike slippage into different registers and realities. For me, the strength of tanka prose lies in its decisive poetic form. Here are poems clearly relating to the modernist current, concerned with construction, understanding and meaning, yet forming a vital link with the Japanese tanka prose masters of ancient times.

— *Patricia Prime*
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