



The Tanka Sequence & Tanka-Prose as Introduction to Tanka

Brian Zimmer

The question put forth by the following article is simply: are the Tanka Sequence and Tanka-Prose among the more viable forms for tanka poets to best introduce tanka to a wider readership? The reader is encouraged to seek-out the English translations of the ancient texts mentioned, as well as the many examples of both forms in the current literature.

Like most poetry, English poetry originated in story and song. It has served both entertainment and mnemonic functions. The narrative poem remains the most widely read poem in English today, but the 20th (and now 21st) centuries evidenced a growing appreciation for the short poem and other forms. Openness to the disjunctive, deconstructed, and experimental also increased during this period.

Despite efforts by English writers like Amy Lowell and the first Japanese-American tanka poet, Jun Fujita, it was the Beat Poets who provided the most successful introduction of Eastern poetic forms to the west. Their impetus stemmed largely from an interest in Eastern religion, particularly the Zen Buddhism of Japan. However, the Beat's eye was trained mostly on haiku.

The slowly growing popularity of tanka may be regarded as a more or less indirect result of the Beat-inspired impulse. There was also a general interest in all things Japanese resulting from the post-war Occupation.

I believe there is no getting around the fact that the tanka's brevity has worked against it where English readership is concerned. English tanka rarely enters into discussions of contemporary poetics except among its practitioners. Yet many who have come to appreciate the richness of the translated ancient texts and many beautiful examples of English tanka, remain bewildered by the lack of interest generated beyond its community.

Tanka requires learning a special set of reading skills. One must be willing to slow down and pay attention to every line, caesura, and image. This type of reading is essential to all poetry but more so for the concentrated English tanka. Read too

quickly tanka can appear easy, sometimes banal, and often not very poetic. We in the tanka community hear the lyrical in the best examples while those new to the genre often do not without consistent exposure. There is more than one reason for this but brevity takes a major place among them.

I am convinced the Tanka Sequence and Tanka-Prose are meaningful forms for introducing tanka in general to English readers. This has to do with the preeminence of the narrative poem in English. These two tanka forms possess the essential narrative “hook” that keeps the western reader interested.

The Tanka Sequence and Tanka-Prose both allow tanka to rise naturally from their narratives, but they do so differently and offer unique reading opportunities for the uninitiated.

The best examples of both genres always prompt reader return. Upon further reading, the tanka become more recognizably contextualized and intrinsic to the work, increasing the reader’s aesthetic pleasure. In this way, readers are trained how to read and enjoy tanka in a natural and familiar manner; the reader learns to slow down without stopping and is impelled to return and ruminate.

We cannot apply the same criteria regarding the individual tanka of the Tanka Sequence to the Tanka- Prose. Success in both forms is achieved by different means, both bearing a singularity peculiar to each.

I believe, along with most tanka poets and theorists, that the Tanka Sequence should be comprised of tanka that can each stand alone as a single poem in their own right. The cumulative effect of these tanka through subtle linkage (very different from the links of renga) give the poem narrative unity.

A Tanka Sequence is not merely a collection of fully formed tanka gathered in support of a theme (a conceit almost always evident when employed). One cannot reach into one’s files and pull out related tanka, combine them in some reasonable relation to each other, and call the piece a Tanka Sequence. The tanka of the Tanka Sequence must be seen to organically rise to thematic coherence from a shared composition like the floors of a building. They occupy their own space but within a larger, enclosed structure. It is this building narrative that gives the individual poems the unity we look for in a Tanka Sequence.

I do not necessarily believe the same holds true for the tanka within Tanka-Prose. It is not necessary for them to be inherently discreet entities to render the Tanka-Prose effective.

Similar to the Tanka Sequence, the poet’s files in Tanka- Prose must remain closed. Both prose and tanka interact in dialectical conversation, sometimes the effect can even be akin to a “liturgical” call and response. Both

prose and tanka give rise to each other, illustrate and delineate, sometimes explode, but usually complement each other. The sense that the prose cannot exist without the tanka and vice-versa is the decisive factor between the Tanka-Prose form and what might otherwise be merely tanka with prose or tanka and prose. It is why, in a departure from normative use, I prefer to use a hyphen when referring to Tanka-Prose.

One sees this technique very clearly in the earliest Japanese literature of the genre such as Tsurayuki's "Tosa Diary." Here the tanka are more directly related to the prose than would be acceptable to even the most open-minded English editors today. The various poetic diaries (*uta-nikki*), and the more loosely composed *zuihitsu*, also exhibit to some extent this same close relationship between prose and tanka. The poems rise as a kind of release or remembrance, out of a visceral response to the prose.

The Tanka Sequence and Tanka-Prose are unique literary forms and must bear obvious signs of having been composed as such.

The reader new to tanka should find familiar touchstones in both the Tanka Sequence and Tanka-Prose forms.

There will be an identifiable flow, progression, and in the case of authentic literature, sympathy, realization or insight. When the reader returns to the poems, they will begin to sense the complexity and extraordinary compression the best tanka integrate. They may be astonished to find how much can be contained and conveyed in a form of such brevity. More to the point, they begin to discover the artistry and craft of juxtaposition that make for the most memorable tanka, singly or in composite form.

Below is an example of a Tanka Sequence I especially like by Miriam Chaikin, titled "night mutters." I would ask the reader to note the poet's skill evident in the narrative connection between the last line of the first tanka and the first line of the second. The two lines appear to flow into each other and complete a single thought, but look again—maybe not! The two poems can and do stand alone. The poet through her artistry has simply crafted them in such a way as to surprise and perhaps initially baffle the reader.

The general principles laid out in this article are merely that, and tentative at best. A poet must be free to do as he or she pleases in adapting (sometimes even breaking) form, when the poem calls for it. The integrity of the poem, not the form, must always take precedence. If not, the poem does injustice to its inspiration and will likely exhibit inferiority for such forcing.

Chaikin's tanka are strangely elliptical, even for a form known for leaving much unsaid and suggested. How strangely the three poems wend in and out of each

other as if in dream, evoking beginnings then short-circuiting to resume again as if falling in and out of a void. But we can follow their trajectory easily enough. The tanka each tell us something significant yet keep us on track like the walls of a maze. The effect of the sequence is to leave the reader with an oddly satisfying sense of unease. I especially appreciate the enigmatic spacing of the first tanka along with its unusual fragmentation, again evidenced in the third.

Chaikin's Tanka Sequence leaves us with more questions than answers. It is presents the reader with an honest uncertainty and inconclusiveness. That being the case, I think it is a fitting conclusion to this article.

night mutters

swiftness
that little dark cloud rushes by me again today
—yet again

it whispers
the same secret in a rush of words too faint
for me to hear

i feel
as if i stand
on uncertain ground and at any moment i can—

miriam chaikin
red lights, Vol. 9, No.1, January 2013

Reprinted with permission from *Skylark*, summer 2013: volume 1, number 1