

DIOGEN pro culture magazine & DIOGEN pro art magazine -ISSN 2296-0929; ISSN 2296-0910

Publisher Einhorn Verlag, Kusunacht, Switzerland

E-mail: contact_editor@diogenpro.com / WWW: <http://www.diogenpro.com/>



Originally published in *The Bamboo Hut* No. 1, 2013.

Everything Is Tanka

by M. Kei

Those who have never written tanka before often think it must be simple to write such a small poem, yet when they try it, they discover it is a good deal harder than it looks. In our modern era, we are taught that 'poetry' consists of 'expressing ourselves,' and that if we have expressed ourselves, we have written poetry. No, we haven't. We have written a journal entry. Even if we format it on five lines, it does not miraculously become a tanka. Keeping a journal in verse is perfectly acceptable (I do it myself), but in order to arise to the level of poetry, it must have artistic expression. There must be something beyond the ordinary about it, no matter how commonplace the subject or vernacular the treatment. In the case of tanka, it must go one step further. Mere brevity and insight are not enough. Tanka is the extra turn of the screw. For the poets accustomed to writing other forms, this compactness, this need to drive the poem even tighter into itself and thereby into the universe, is exceptionally difficult to master. I find it is usually easier to teach neophytes with little or no poetry experience; I do not have to break down pre-conceived notions about what poetry is and how it works.

To learn to write tanka, the poet must first learn to see. This is absolutely essential because tanka is based on the adroit choice of detail that can convey far more than is printed on the page. To do that, the poet has to be able to see the significance of an object or event and be able to follow it as it pins together the obvious with the numinous. Here then, are lessons in writing tanka utilizing poems of my own with explanations for how they came about.

another lighthouse
by Donahoo; I recognize
the white cylinder,
the black cap,
the vigil of centuries

Slow Motion : The Log of a Chesapeake Bay Skipjack.

Donahoo was a builder of lighthouses on the Chesapeake Bay in the early 19th century. His lighthouses are almost all identical: squat white cylinders with black caps and Fresnel lenses, built from the native Maryland granite. Many people have visited the Bay and seen his lighthouses, but it has not occurred to them to ask who built them, how, when, or why. The lighthouse is an obvious feature of the landscape, and the ordinary person can readily conjure up associations with storms and ships and might think she has written poetry, but tanka must dig deeper. Tanka is too small a poem to permit the obvious. Details matter. More importantly, those details must add up to something.

Lucille Nixon, in her introduction to *Sounds from the Unknown*, says,

I discovered that I was seeing and hearing in a way that I had never before experienced. This had all happened so smoothly, so gently, that I had been unaware that the practicing of writing *tanka* had any effect at all. This discipline, as with any endeavor into which one puts knowledge, practice, and interest-affection, was being rewarded in many small ways. For example, for years each spring I had admired a certain wild flower, the horse mint, for its lavender coloring, its fringed and delicate outline, so fragile though balanced on a stern and forbidding stem, but I had never noticed its tiny coral center. I couldn't believe that it was there when first I noticed it, and so I looked at the many blossoms to see if all were sent up from this roseate center, and sure enough, they were all the same, and had been for centuries, no doubt! I just had not been able to *see*.

Seeing, then, is the fundamental skill in writing tanka. However, seeing the details is not enough; the poet must see how the details connect to other details, and especially how they invoke the unseen.

another candle lit
at his grave,
chokecherry trees
bloom as white
as ghosts

Gusts 4.

The chokecherry is outside my apartment window. It looks like a maple, but it blooms with spindles of white blossom in the spring. I didn't know what it was. I could have contented myself with the 'white blooming tree outside my window,' but I didn't. I looked it up to discover the name: *Prunus virginiana*. In doing that, I learned that its spindles of blossoms are referred to as 'candles.' That immediately evoked other candles: those set up on the makeshift altar outside my sister's house when her son died. That offered still more resonances. My sister, choked on grief, the chokecherry too astringent to eat. The Japanese cherry is misted over with a rosy haze of sentimentality, but the American cherry is fresh and new and bitter. Japanese cherry trees represent rebirth because they bloom every year; the poet can take comfort in the knowledge of their return. The chokecherry also blooms every year, but since it is not a tanka trope, it is possible to map other meanings onto it. The chokecherry becomes a symbol of death that gives no comfort.

I frequently give myself the exercise of writing tanka out of whatever presents itself, and I oftentimes give myself deliberately difficult assignments. For example, asphalt. The parking lot for my apartment complex is large and obvious; it dominates the landscape. You can't ask for a less poetic subject than asphalt.

in the mud
next to the asphalt,
a broken doll's head,
a crow pecking
at plastic eyes

Atlas Poetica 4.

Walking outside to have a look at the asphalt, I found the broken toy at the edge of the parking lot. The crow is imaginary, but thanks to horror movies, the sight of a decapitated doll's head naturally conjured up macabre images. Salvador Dalí had an influence as well. I daresay horror movies and Dalí are not what spring to most people's mind when thinking of tanka poetry, but everything, absolutely everything, is poetry. It's all a matter of seeing it. Seeing is helped by turning off the television and stepping out to look at things: weeds, art, stranger's faces, graffiti, sparrows, everything.

Asphalt poems are unusual in tanka literature, and unusual for my own work as well, yet if I hadn't been willing to engage the ordinary, I never would have written it.

I have written several 'asphalt' poems since then.

"Riverview Avenue"
no river, no view, no avenue
one lane of
cracked asphalt slipping
into the past tense

Ribbons 6:2.

how full the bay
lapping at the bowl
of earth
pilings and asphalt
unable to contain it

From 'Stone Amid the Water Weeds.' *Lynx XXII:2.*

burning rubber
across your asphalt heart—
skid marks
lead to the wreck
you've made of me

Kujaku Poetry & Ships.

When I'm online on Twitter, I sometimes challenge people to stump me by giving me topics to write on. Here are two I wrote in response to the prompts 'computer games' and 'socks.'

ah, Melville,
what's Moby Dick to me
when I can
conquer the world
from the comfort of my desk?

Kujaku Poetry & Ships.

all these socks
without mates,
yet not one
of them is willing
to pair up with another

Tanka Corner.

The brain must be allowed and encouraged to make random connections. Although startling juxtapositions are not poetry in themselves, they help the mind to make the poetic leap.

two eyes staring
out from the glass coffin
of my skull,
Snow White, I wish I could sleep
as peacefully as you

Eye to the Telescope 1.

I noticed an advertisement for Disney's *Snow White*, and the sight of her lying in her glass coffin reminded me of the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which gave me the metaphor for the excruciating vascular headache I was experiencing. Not to mention, an acute envy for Snow White's peaceful sleep. Migraine sufferers have told me this poem especially resonated with them. So you see, even old cartoons and dreadfully bad science fiction movies can lead to tanka.

it is hard to imagine
that this little thing,
this single snowflake,
has brought
the world to a stop

Streetlights : Poetry of Modern Urban Life in Modern English Tanka.

The adroitly chosen detail, in this case, a single snowflake, serves as a synecdoche for an entire snowstorm paralyzing the Northeast. Synecdoche is commonly used in English, but not given much analysis as a technique of poetry. A synecdoche is when a part or piece represents a whole. For example, when the captain calls, "All hands on deck!" she doesn't want the disembodied hands; she wants the entire sailor.

shaking the bats
out of the mainsail
a cloud of night
made homeless
by my hands

Ribbons, 2:4.

Sometimes a piece or part is all that we can perceive, yet by perceiving it, we know much more. Out of these images we can make poetry.

as night
surrenders to dawn,
a slim mast
emerges from
the mist of Red Cap Creek

Slow Motion : The Log of a Chesapeake Bay Skipjack.

Tanka has often been described as ‘fragmentary’ and ‘suggestive’; Jun Fujita calls it ‘illusive.’ Yet a tanka is a complete poem. It seems fragmentary because we are used to prose and poetry spelling everything out for us and granting closure. Tanka are open to interpretation and deliberately so. They contain ‘dreaming room,’ which Denis Garrison, who coined the term, explains as, “some empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context.”- Michael McClintock calls this quality “multivalence,”- while I have called it, “the labyrinth of the poem.”-

To write tanka, try the following experiment. Look around you and jot down several items that come into few. Don’t try to make a poem of them, just pick a few random things. I tried this with Sean Wills, somebody who had never written poetry before. His objects included a messy desk containing some old coins and books. I tutored him to create the following tanka.

thick English coins
a bookshelf in disarray
dusty and old
scattered volumes
read and unread

Sean Wills. *Atlas Poetica* 3.

There is no person in the poem; it is a snapshot or still life of things seen. The reader must connect them himself, yet, without a doubt, there are connections. This type of tanka is what we call 'shasei' or 'sketch from life.' The Japanese tanka reformer Masaoka Shiki deliberately adopted the Western painting technique of drawing from life and applied it to tanka. Some readers claim that these tanka aren't even poems, but that's like claiming a still life isn't really art. Not every poem or painting evokes a dramatic moment in human life, and that's why landscapes are so very popular, even when (especially when?) they evoke scenes in which nothing in particular is happening. They are like sumi-e, the Japanese ink brush art where a few lines represent an image. Consider Hasegawa's pine trees <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pine_Trees.jpg>. if you're looking for the richly luminous colors of Van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night*, you'll probably be disappointed, but that doesn't mean Hasegawa's pine trees aren't art.

While the method of observing the 'thing as it is' easily leads to shasei, it can also lead to more subjective treatments. Another student of mine, Jamila, tried the same experiment. She made note of the loose roof tiles on her house and found a simile.

his words rattle
like loose roof tiles
on a house
I wish
I could abandon

Jamila. *Atlas Poetica 1*.

Some people who have tried this at my suggestion have complained that there is 'nothing out there' capable of inspiring poetry. While I am highly skeptical about that, if true, nothing is still something. Here are a few of mine on the 'uninspiring' sight of 'nothing.'

December . . .
in the stillness of
the ochre dawn,
the neighbor's roofline
and nothing more

Modern English Tanka, 2:1.

the skyline's
not much to look at,
just a green line
drawn along the bottom
of the clouds

red lights, III:1.

rags,
tatters,
and remnants,
full of raveled
winds

Modern English Tanka, 1:1

Or perhaps the complaint is not that there is 'nothing,' but that there is something unattractive. Say, a barge.

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

Modern English Tanka, 1:1

Or trash.

shining like a mirror:
the end of a discarded
beer can
before the weeds
cover it

From 'Asking Passage,' *Lynx XXII:3.*

Or a bad ex.

thirty years later:
Prince Charming with nose hair
and love handles;
Cinderella on the telephone
kvetching about child support

Sketchbook : A Journal for Eastern & Western Short Forms, 1:1.

Or annoying people.

they come
selling God, magazines,
and cable tv,
these well-dressed strangers
on my doorstep

Modern English Tanka, 1:3.

Or bad news on the television.

an October day
of pumpkins and corn,
horse droppings steaming,
Amish schoolgirls
dead on the floor

Simply Haiku, 5:1

Or family troubles.

my daughter
searches for an apartment
she can afford
where nobody
has been shot

Heron Sea, Short Poems of the Chesapeake Bay.

I have noticed the average person doesn't see much—and may even complain about what she does see! For example, most sailors are annoyed by recreational boaters who don't secure their halyards. Unsecured halyards flap against the aluminum masts and make a racket. A nuisance, plain and simple.

storm bells
the musical tones
of halyards
ringing in
the freshening breeze

Landfall : Poetry of Place in Modern English Tanka.

Likewise, derelict buildings have no poetic value. Heaps of rusted machinery are eyesores.

the iron skeleton
at the water's edge,
what was it once
when machines had meaning
and men their purpose?

Anglo-Japanese Tanka Society.

ospreys nest
on the derelict trestle;
trains rumble over
the 'new' bridge
rusted now by age

Heron Sea, Short Poems of the Chesapeake Bay.

But if you're a poet, then everything is poetry.

Some things are inherently interesting. Writing about this is not difficult. However, it does require that we get off our duffs and go somewhere we don't usually go and have a look at things and do stuff and meet people we wouldn't have otherwise.

Taking a windjammer cruise that visited Caribbean islands outside of the usual tourist meccas.

it was a schooner
that brought me to
this place,
met by old Dutch women
hawking lobsters

Atlas Poetica 1.

Crewing aboard a skipjack traveling the Chesapeake Bay.

the leaning tower
of Sharp's Island Light . . .
all that remains
of a vanished island,
a vanished time

Slow Motion : The Log of a Chesapeake Bay Skipjack.

Visiting an exhibit at the Brandywine Art Museum, Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania.

contemplating
Nureyev's black jacket
and ballet slippers,
how small the man
how great the skill

Simply Haiku, 5:1

Following my mother around San Antonio, Texas, as she retraced her childhood.

as he stropped his razor
to shave a customer
in his shop near the Alamo,
did my grandfather think of
Mexican bayonets?

From 'The Streets of San Antonio.' *Modern English Tanka*, 1:3

Traveling out of town, the only hotel room open was a bed and breakfast.

spending the night
at a small inn,
I discover
all the other guests
are Secret Service agents

Sketchbook : A Journal for Eastern & Western Short Forms, 2:1

As we can see, everything from the ordinary to the extraordinary is poetry.
Writing is the easy part. It's seeing that's hard.

¹ Nixon, Lucille, ed. *Sounds from the Unknown*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, publisher, 1963, p ?² Garrison, Denis M. 'Dreaming Room.' *Modern English Tanka* 3. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Spring, 2007.³ McClintock, Michael. 'Tanka in Collage and Montage Sets: Multivalence, *Duende*, and Beyond.' *Modern English Tanka* 1:4. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Summer, 2007.⁴ Kei, M. 'The Labyrinth of Tanka.' *Modern English Tanka* 7. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Spring, 2008.