

Tanka Prose, Tanka Tradition: An Interview with Jeffrey Woodward

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Jeffrey Woodward currently edits *Haibun Today* and formerly edited *Modern Haibun & Tanka Prose*. His poems and essays appear widely in periodicals in North America, Europe and Asia. A collection of his Western and Eastern poems, *In Passing*, was published in 2007. He edited *The Tanka Prose Anthology* in 2008.

Jeffrey, as a preface to our interview, I want to mention how, in the inaugural issue of *Modern Haibun and Tanka Prose* (Summer 2009), you described, in your editorial, how writers and readers of mixed prose and verse genres often find themselves at a crossroads where they might feel inclined to reflect on the road that led there and the many possible routes that lie ahead. I am hoping this interview will provide an opportunity for you to assist us in doing just that. It also struck me that the following tanka excerpted from your own tanka prose piece 'A Record of Semimaru' seems particularly pertinent:

one comes now one goes
one is known and one is not
all are travelers here
merely passersby who part
on the road to the capital¹

Tanka, from the eighth century *Manyōshū* until this day, have often been elicited by other tanka. Your poem, Claire, is an invitation to others to respond. This dialogue in verse can engage two contemporaries or it can reach back in time and link today's poet with one long dead. My tanka that you've so kindly quoted is an example of the latter conversation; it is, in fact, a variation upon Semimaru's poem, preserved as #10 in the thirteenth century anthology *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* (100 Poems 100 Poets):

coming from
or going to
the capital
friends and strangers
meet and part

Semimaru's theme is one of universal mutability or transience. Acquaintances and strangers alike, on their way to or from the capital, meet only to part. I am here today and gone tomorrow. That all is in flux is Semimaru's existential certainty; one might say, in fact, that change *is* his capital. I felt a particular kinship with this tanka and with its depiction of the material absence of any reliable or permanent center. The stability of Semimaru's capital, in the end, is illusory and, in that respect,

shares the dubious character of our vain and bustling modern ones.

As editor of *Haibun Today*, you are doing much to promote the reading and practice of tanka prose. With journals such as *Lynx* and *Atlas Poetica* publishing tanka prose, more and more readers and writers are being drawn to the “adventure and promise of a new world.” Jeffrey, could you begin by telling us how and when you first became interested in tanka prose?

I was drawn to tanka prose initially as a practical matter. I wrote haibun and, in my efforts to press the prose half of that equation closer to poetry and farther from journalism, I felt in longer compositions that the sketchy, fragmentary nature of haiku was a liability. I wrote tanka also. Tanka, in my view, has greater definition than haiku as a form; it was logical, if not inevitable, to turn there for a solution.

My interest in tanka prose as a reader precedes this affinity for tanka as a practising poet. I'd studied examples of Japanese tanka prose, particularly from the Heian Period, on various occasions in the years preceding this. Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* and the *Izumi Shikibu Diary* in the Earl Miner translations; *Tales of Ise*, the anonymous *An Account of a Journey to the East* and Nun Abutsu's *Journal of the Sixteenth Night Moon* in their Helen Craig McCullough versions. Those few titles are a fair sampling, respectively, of tanka prose's incarnations as diary, memoir, poem tale, and travelogue. Tanka prose, as I was to learn subsequently, offers much more.

In its rudimentary form, tanka prose served as a contextual frame for the accompanying waka, taking the form of a preface (*kotobagaki*) or poem tale (*uta monogatari*). In *The Tanka Prose Anthology* (Modern English Tanka Press, 2008), you describe the prose of this stage in the history of Japanese literature as being “rarely more than a handmaiden to the poem.”² Perhaps you could elaborate on this and explain how these prose accompaniments evolved over time?

A description of early prefaces and poem tales as humble framing devices for tanka is a fair generalization, Claire. Sophisticated exceptions to that rule, nonetheless, can be read in the eighth century *Manyōshū*.

Many prefaces or *kotobagaki* are entirely functional and limited to a cursory description of the tanka's occasion or topic. Look at the *Kokinshū*,³ for example, where the occasion of tanka 325's composition is perfunctorily recorded as “Composed while stopping for the night on a journey to the Nara capital” while tanka 257's occasion is a social event “From the poetry contest held at the residence of Prince Koresada.” The prefaces in the *Kokinshū*, often enough, blandly document the conventional topic of the poem: for tanka 336, “On plum blossoms in the snow,” or for tanka 339, “On the year's end.”

Sometimes greater context is provided, as in the *kotobagaki* to tanka 589:

Tsurayuki sent this letter in the Third Month, when he heard that someone else was visiting and writing to a woman he had known:

my heart is not like
the dew which settles on the
flowers unconcerned
each time you bend before the
wind my torment increases ⁴

Here, the reader is provided with the season (“Third Month”) and circumstance (“someone else was visiting . . . a woman he had known”) that inspired Tsurayuki’s tanka; he, furthermore, discovers that the poet’s theme is one of naked jealousy. This is nascent narrative, the rudimentary elements for a tale. Even so, the primary purpose of this preface is to explain to the reader the why-and-wherefore of the excellent poem’s composition.

Compare the Tsurayuki *kotobagaki* to Masaoka Shiki’s preface to a tanka sequence written in 1902:

Nothing is tastier than horsetails, and nothing is more delightful than gathering them. Hekigoto, who went to Akabane Village on an excursion, brought some back. When he told me he was going there again, a mood came over me to make the following tanka, imagining the scene of horsetail-gathering. ⁵

The ten tanka that follow Shiki’s prose focus upon scenes of horsetail ferns neglected in the fields, of horsetails beside

railroad tracks, of recollections of Shiki’s pastoral youth and participation in sessions of horsetail-gathering. These are poems of delight in a countryside that the poet, confined to his sickbed and facing imminent death, is now barred from visiting:

those horsetail plants
I once picked in the fields
by my home
this I now recall
in an alien land ⁶

Shiki’s prose is richer in mood and nuance than the preface I cited to the Tsurayuki poem. However, Shiki’s preface does share, in common with the examples above, the transitional declarative statement that links prose to verse “a mood came over me to make the following tanka” Greater unity of purpose between prose and verse, of course, can be established by the conscious suppression of these expository connectives that, in one sense, are the trademark of much Japanese tanka prose from the *Manyōshū* to modern times, these insistent reminders that a poem was written *because* of this circumstance or that occasion. The reader, in fact, might be left safely to infer as much by the presence of the tanka after the prose. Modern tanka prose in English, therefore, stubbornly eschews such explanatory links and chooses, instead, to blend prose and tanka closely into a harmonious whole.

Following Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* and the anonymous *Tales of Ise*, I believe Japanese prose and waka went through an astonishing metamorphosis, flourishing in a wide variety of new contexts, for instance diary, biography, and military chronicle?

A rough idea of the extent of this dramatic proliferation of works that combine prose and tanka can be had by a simple enumeration of the classifications that medieval Japanese literary scholars devised to account for its diversity: diary (*nikki*), biography (*denki*), travelogue (*kiko*) and preface (*kotobagaki*). A tale is a *monogatari* but distinctions are made with respect to the kind of tale: poem (*uta*), romance (*tsukuri*), historical tale (*rekishi*) and military chronicle (*gunki*).

Boundaries between the various types of early Japanese prosimetrum, or mixed prose-plus-verse writing, are quite blurred as observed by such influential scholars as Jin'ichi Konishi and Earl Miner; one and the same composition may be termed variously a tale (*monogatari*), diary (*nikki*) or poetry collection (*shū*). The scholarly taxonomist can distinguish further, in those writings classed as *nikki*, between the diary with dated entries and the memoir with its freer treatment of chronology.

One possible reason no single term was employed for prose-plus-tanka writings is this: from the close of the *Manyō* period until the rise of renga, waka, our modern tanka, so dominated the Japanese literary landscape that little else was considered worthy of the name poetry. Critical attention, therefore, was not

focused upon the verse-type employed with prose, since this verse was invariably waka, but was directed instead toward the narrative or expository model of the prose-tale, memoir, history and so forth. It is only much later, with the rise of haikai no renga and of its offspring haibun, that distinctions between verse-types become necessary in examples of Japanese prosimetrum.

What part did Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* play in the development of tanka prose as a powerful medium that not only established context for the poem, but served to elucidate it to the point that it was no longer subservient to the poem and indeed, that tanka and prose were capable of reciprocal enhancement?

The early elevation of verse or later hegemony of prose are two extremes of the tanka prose spectrum. Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari* (circa 1008), one might argue, represents the culmination of the latter development. In *Genji*, the precise descriptions, absorbing characters and animated style of Murasaki's prose threaten to reduce the accompanying tanka to the incidental role of a lyrical aside.

Murasaki Shikibu, however, is not only the author of *Genji*. Richard Bowring translated and collected under one cover both her memoir and her annotated poetry collection as *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs*. The *shū* consists of 120 plus waka, each preceded by a *kotobagaki*, and these prefaces range from the merely

serviceable or expository sentence to a highly poetic and suggestive wedding of prose and waka that resembles modern English practice. Look, for example, at entry 46, an ekphrastic work on the subject of a painting:

Two or three women had opened up a side door and were sitting there viewing the pear blossom. Everyone else had fallen asleep, but one old woman had her chin in her hands and was gazing intently at the scene.

Hidden in the darkness
Of a spring night
It has no color,
An aged heart
Intent on the fragrance.⁷

Murasaki's *nikki*, by way of contrast, stands closer to the triumph of prose as exemplified by *Genji monogatari* than to the general celebration of waka that is demonstrated in her *shū*. The memoir, in fact, balances lengthy prose passages of exacting description of court costume and court ceremony with digressions that display Murasaki's acute psychological insight. Where do the waka lie in all of this? There are precious few of them (less than twenty, I believe) and they generally function in one of two capacities, either as formal praise for ranking members of the court or, where two waka are joined, as poetic exchanges between court ladies or between the same ladies and their suitors.

Jeffrey, I'd like to talk now about the variety of forms which modern tanka prose may take. How does the basic unit of one paragraph and one tanka differ from its inverted form of one tanka, one paragraph?

When the paragraph leads, the closing tanka caps the prose, Claire, and is the culminating point of the composition, a sign of the work's fulfillment. Placement of the tanka first and paragraph last disrupts our common expectation. In this inversion, the tanka may possess narrative or expository qualities that we ordinarily associate with prose, whereas the paragraph that now concludes the composition acquires, to some degree, the climactic characteristics that we customarily ascribe to tanka. Consider, for example, Dru Philippou's "Sloughing Off":

what blooms
and bones she keeps
they are props
that she will paint
with her mountain

I would walk to Cerro Pedernal and see myself bounding up the flat-topped butte in no time. At the top, where Georgia O'Keeffe's ashes were scattered, I could race along the narrow ridge with the wind's warm handclasp and plunge headlong into the blue, sloughing off my skin among pink hollyhocks, to return home as a stranger.⁸

The concord of flowers and bones in the tanka, of rejuvenation and death, has many precedents in lyrical poetry; such material, too, is in keeping with the painting of Georgia O'Keefe, the composition's nominal inspiration. But the tanka, when all is said and done, serves as the necessary backstory for the fantasy flight, if you will, of the paragraph it precedes. The poetic core of Philippou's piece can be found in the closing sentence, in the narrator's acceptance of the "wind's warm handclasp" for her resolute descent, a leap that is meant to secure her "return home as a stranger."

With reference to the response poems and tanka pairings exhibited in the *Manyōshū* period and the popularity in recent years of tanka sequences in English, what distinct features does tanka prose have over sequences?

The presence of prose so pliable, so receptive to sudden variations in tempo or style distinguishes tanka prose from tanka sequences. The contrast of the two modes of writing, prose and verse, is not available to the tanka sequence by definition, and while the sequence is as capable as tanka prose of marked shifts in pace from tanka to tanka, the sequence cannot offer the immediate and dramatic counterpoint of prose and verse rhythms. Tanka prose, too, often incorporates tanka sets or sequences within its broader frame.

In other respects, the tanka sequence and tanka prose have much in common. Both value understatement and ambiguity

by design; both have a penchant for episodic development, for leaping over superfluous matter and lingering upon essential detail. Both stem from the same Japanese root, the waka or tanka that first came to maturity in the *Manyōshū*.

In your essay 'Prose and Verse in Tandem,' you propose that verse sequences within prose are more prevalent in tanka prose pieces than in examples of haibun and you attribute this less to prescribed traditions within English language tanka and haibun circles and more to ancient Japanese tanka traditions and the very nature of tanka itself.⁹ Could you elaborate on this?

Tanka, as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, were exchanged. Custom required that the recipient of a tanka respond in kind. A reply often echoed the original gift by borrowing freely from its language and imagery; such repetition drew the call and response poems together in an act of intimate association. These poetic pairings, in the *Manyōshū* and later imperial anthologies, illustrate tanka's native affinity for integration, for the construction of sequences of two or more poems. Consider the deliberate reiteration in this example, an exchange between the Mother of Michitsuna, author of "The Gossamer Journal" (*Kagerō nikki*), and Lady Tokihime, where the "water oats" are the court ladies who mutually lament their neglect by the "reapers," their husbands:

Where might be the swamp / in which
they can put down roots / those
water oats / the reapers have
harvested, / cutting to the very bottom?

**soko ni sae / karu to iu naru /
makomogusa / ika naru sawa ni / ne o
todomuramu**

The marsh from which / the water oats
have vanished / is this one at Yodo: /
people said they had struck root / in
the bottom where you dwell.

**makomogusa / karu to wa yodo no /
sawa nare ya / ne o todomu chō / sawa
wa soko to ka¹⁰**

The influence of tanka's traditions upon tanka prose can be discerned most clearly in a reading of the Japanese *chōka*, the long poem of the *Manyō* period. The body of the *chōka* consists of alternating lines of five and seven syllables but, from the time of Hitomaro on, the *chōka* was completed by a *hanka* an envoy of one, two or several tanka. *Hanka* means "verse that repeats" and that is precisely what the tanka in this poetic appendix do; they recapitulate and amplify the *chōka's* main motifs. Each tanka in the envoy is related not only to the parent poem, the *chōka*, but to its siblings also. These relationships prefigure how the individual tanka of a sequence within a larger tanka prose composition adhere to the prose body as well as to the other members of their tanka set.

Yamabe no Akihito, in a *chōka* that commemorates an imperial outing, devotes fifteen verses to a vivid depiction of an elemental seascape and the rustic seaweed-harvesters who inhabit it. His *hanka* is composed of two tanka that recall the sweeping tide, the "gemlike weeds" and a near island:

When the tide comes in
And the gemlike weeds on the rocks
Of this island coast
Hide themselves slowly in the waves,
Will our thoughts go after them?

When the tide pours in
Across the flats of Waka Bay
The seastrand vanishes,
And the cranes with raucous cries
Fly off to shelter in the reeds.¹¹

A simple glance at the romaji transcription of the original will reveal how the reiteration of key words closely links the main poem to the envoy and the two tanka to one another. "Oki tsu shima," "shio," "tamamo," "michi" they strike repeatedly with force, like the waves against the rocks.

Contemporary tanka prose shares this propensity for employing verses in sequence, whether at the beginning, middle or end of the compositional design. A modern example of tanka prose that parallels the *chōka's* incorporation of a formal envoy with repeated elements can be found in Michael McClintock's 'Before Croissants and Coffee':

Briefly, before the morning commute, before the bakery set out its morning bread to cool on the racks, before the postman's alarm rang beside his bed, and the dog scratched, wanting out, a summer rain fell on the streets and boulevards of Paris.

You slept I saw a dream tiptoe upon your brow and would not wake you. I watched alone on the balcony the wet, shining pavements mirror the clouds.

From below,
I hear the bread racked
and readied;
across the way a dog
trots from its door.

The postman's van
speeds by in needful haste:
the rain has ceased,
you awake,
and we embrace.¹²

Bread, postman, dog and rain rebound and echo from prose to tanka, from tanka to prose.

Again, in 'Prose and Verse in Tandem,' you point out the prevalence of multiple tanka and tanka sequences within tanka prose. While journals such as *Modern English Tanka* and *Atlas Poetica* consistently published such examples of tanka prose, Jeffrey, other journals appeared to be more reticent. It has been suggested that the

inclusion of multiple tanka was not always balanced by the "brevity and lightness" of the prose. Do you think these possible criticisms are warranted and that if this was the perception of some editors might it have limited the number of venues receptive to tanka prose of this type?

The tanka and prose elements should balance harmoniously, whether the composition offers one paragraph and one tanka or the complexities of many tanka and many paragraphs. The demand for unity and for subordination of the parts to the whole, however, is not a problem unique to tanka prose; it is an aesthetic consideration, on a smaller scale, of the single tanka and it is a concern of the sonnet and novel as well. Where this balance is wanting, Claire, criticism is justified and I, too, am sensitive to such shortcomings in execution or conception.

You alluded to the possible reservations of various journals with respect to tanka prose. Tanka periodicals, such as *Eucalyptus*, *red lights*, *Ribbons* and *Gusts*, are often small format, print-only publications. The mundane practical consideration of space limitations, in such venues, may work against an editor's possible acceptance of tanka prose.

There is also the question of the novelty of this enterprise in English-language practice. Early examples of tanka prose can be found in the 80s and 90s but publication of the same occurred only sporadically. Nor can it be said that much of this early writing commends itself to today's reader; it demonstrates scant

cognizance of tanka prose in its classical and medieval Japanese context and therefore the English “translation” loses much. The existence of tanka prose in English was virtually subterranean until its emergence upon a firm footing in 2007; it flew “under the radar” and was invisible not only to many tanka editors but to most practicing tanka poets.

Tanka prose, nevertheless, has an ancient provenance within the tanka genre; it has been present, in one form or another, from the *Manyōshū* until the present. So the appearance of newness is only that an appearance. Tanka prose is deeply embedded in tanka’s history and shares its aesthetic. The tanka community, therefore, is not without obligation to support tanka prose and neglects it only at its own peril—squandering, thereby, a rich portion of its own inheritance.

In your essay ‘The Elements of Tanka Prose,’ the question was posed, does tanka prose suggest prose that is composed in the ‘spirit of tanka?’¹³ From my reading, I have seen the rich diversity of this genre and how the number of tanka and their placement within the piece can influence the overall character and flavour of the prose. For example, in one of your own compositions, “Glass Lake,” the opening tanka takes on the role the accompanying prose might often carry, providing a backdrop for the lyrical prose that follows. In many of Patricia Prime’s pieces, such as ‘Wings over Water,’ we see the use of refrain, the suppression of punctuation and the heightening of lyricism. As tanka

poetry has evolved and we have seen the adoption of more minimalist and experimental forms, such as gogyoshi, do you think it is fair to say that the ‘spirit of tanka’ has acquired an air of “anything goes?”

Two temptations beset tanka. The first lies in an appeal to ossified ‘tradition,’ in a misinterpretation or falsification of tanka that aims at slavish imitation of Japanese models in subject and form. True tradition, it seems to me, can be deciphered only by serious study of tanka literature and history, by the identification of those vital qualities that transcend generational change as well as by an identification, on the negative side, of capricious trends and stylistic mannerisms. The second temptation arises from a rejection of true tradition as an impediment to artistic freedom and the consequent abandonment of tanka form and aesthetic license, in other words, or the attitude that “anything goes.”

Sanford Goldstein, in his essay ‘Not Again! Tanka Strings and Sequences,’ lamented: “The world of tanka is extending beyond its clear definitions The tendency is to create new worlds in place of an older, more stable order, an increasingly complex world that seems to go along with the complications of modernity. This diffusion includes the writing of . . . short prose pieces with tanka And so the wayward tanka world continues.”¹⁴

Now, I respect Goldstein’s work as both tanka poet and translator but his

characterization of tanka prose as a modern “diffusion” of an “older, more stable order” and as a reflection of “the wayward tanka world” is curious, if you will forgive my understatement, and flies demonstrably in the face of tanka’s history. Sanford did not invent tanka prose when he published his ‘Tanka Walk’ in 1983 nor did I invent tanka prose when I published my essay ‘The Road Ahead for Tanka in English’ in 2007. Tanka prose is as old – or nearly so – as tanka itself.

Look at the *Manyōshū* only. You will discover numerous examples of eighth century tanka prose sprinkled throughout its pages. One work by Ōtomo no Tabito should be singled out here as an example of the sophistication and artistry of this early tanka prose; it is entitled ‘An Excursion to Matsura River’ and can be readily found in translations of the *Manyōshū* by Edwin A. Cranston, Ian Hideo Levy and the Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai or Japanese Classics Translation Committee.¹⁵ I would like to encourage tanka poets and editors to study it. Tabito’s ‘Excursion’ opens with a prose preface that richly describes the chance meeting on the river of an elderly first-person narrator and some provincial maidens; he is so taken by their beauty that he inquires if they are not “immortals,” but they, in reply, insist that they are nothing more than “the daughters of fishermen.” Allusions to classical Chinese poetry are woven into the flirtatious repartee that completes the prose section. Eleven tanka follow; the first eight continue the dialogue between the narrator and young women that was

initiated by the prose preface while a final set of three tanka, in an objective voice, repeats and dwells upon the main motifs of the composition as a whole. Prose and tanka are fully integrated by the many variations played upon the erotic undercurrent of such images as the delicate gem-like fish, the froth of the rapids on the rocks and the wet skirts of the maidens.

In your interview with Ray Rasmussen, ‘Terra Incognita: The World of Haibun and Tanka Prose,’ you say “every form has its own tradition, its own set of conventions, and with application, a form and attendant conventions can be learned.”¹⁶ Would you say this is true of tanka prose, Jeffrey, or is the genre still – and perhaps destined to remain – in a state of flux?

Tanka prose is one species of prosimetrum; it combines, like other members of that genus, the two modes of writing, prose and verse, but can be distinguished from its fellows by a preference for tanka as its verse component. Tanka prose is constructed upon a building block or basic unit – one paragraph, one tanka – and admits greater complication in structure through compounding of either one or both of these elements. Variation in the number and placement of tanka in relation to the prose is the prime source of its rich formal diversity. That, in brief, is a simple definition of the *form* of tanka prose.

Broadly speaking, recall that our subject, like the tanka sequence, is a

member of the tanka family and therefore operates within the traditions and conventions of that genre as adapted by the English-language tanka community from Japanese models. Some Japanese conventions are applicable to English practice and some are not. Some conventions, too, are victims of history and face extinction due to changes in taste or to the natural evolution of a literary form. A relevant example of this latter circumstance can be cited from the historical development of tanka prose. Common to tanka prose of the classical Japanese period is reliance upon stock explanatory phrases to signal a transition from prose to tanka: “Thus she composed this poem,” “He wrote a letter with the following,” or “She replied.”

Consider this extract from *The Tale of Saigyō* as translated by Meredith McKinney:

Day and night in his thatched hut
he longed for the Buddha’s coming.
But old friends who did not share
his feeling came to see the cherry
blossoms, and their talk of old times
disturbed his peace of mind.
Annoyed, he wrote:

It is
the one sad sin
of the cherry blossom
that people come in such crowds
to see it.¹⁷

Here, “Annoyed, he wrote” is a pointer that directs the reader from paragraph to

tanka; one can omit this marker without any loss to the total composition and, from the late Heian period forward, poets increasingly do so, abandoning a convention that dominated the earlier tanka prose of the *Manyōshū* and *Tales of Ise*. This suppression of the transitional phrase is the norm in modern English practice. Look at Bob Lucky’s ‘Three’:

In the village the church bell
intones the hour. We arrive just in
time to hear the monotonous
clanging of noon noon noon noon
like a dotted line dividing
morning from the rest of the day.
After a long and leisurely lunch, we
check into a *pensione* and go out to
explore. The clock strikes three
three three. It is inexplicably sad,
like a dirge: three three three.
Stopping in a café, we have a
brandy we don’t need, and then
several espressos, as we stare at the
remainder of the afternoon.

around the steeple
the clamor of bats
gathering dusk
when I touch you
you look at your watch¹⁸

Lucky’s work, I believe, shows us how the absence of an overt transitional phrase reflects the tendency, common to modern English practice, of seamless integration of prose and tanka.

In ‘The Road Ahead for Tanka in English,’ you describe how early examples of tanka prose in Japanese literature saw the waka enshrined within the prose, an approach which you called the “lapidary style.”¹⁹ Do you think in modern English tanka prose the tanka should be capable of autonomy, or with the prose, should it merely serve to contribute to the aesthetic whole?

I’m not unduly concerned about prescribing rules for either compositional element paragraph or tanka. I strive, instead, to identify and isolate the exemplary tanka prose work for an intimate study of how writing’s two modes relate to one another therein. Poetry precedes criticism and, if rules are wanted, prudence requires us to derive our guidelines from an empirical analysis of the best writing that the genre has to offer.

Descriptively, some writers begin with a pre-existing tanka and write prose to its order; some writers compose tanka and prose in one sitting. Some tanka, if extracted from a tanka prose work, might be capable of a meaningful and independent existence; some tanka might not.

Can’t we say much the same, however, of the individual tanka that comprise a tanka sequence? Does the reader dwell, in reading the same, on the excellence of one tanka alone? Or is the reader’s attention directed by the orchestration of several tanka working in concert toward one end? If the reader, upon finishing the work, is satisfied by the poetic object, is the value

of the sequence diminished by a judgment that one tanka can boast of autonomy while another remains a servant to context?

In connection with the previous question, Denis M. Garrison described the “dreaming room” quality of multivalent tanka, i.e., the “empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context.”²⁰ Jeffrey, do you think the inclusion of prose impinges on the “dreaming room” quality of the tanka within a tanka prose piece, or, conversely, does the tanka devalue the prose?

I view the contemporary example of tanka prose in English as a complete poem in its own right and therefore do not distinguish between *this* tanka and *that* prose. I do not set the two modes of writing at odds. If Garrison’s concept of “dreaming room” is applicable to our subject, neither paragraph nor tanka can lay exclusive claim to it.

The prose and tanka of a single composition, Claire, mutually influence one another. Many poets write prose “around” a pre-existing tanka. Once they place their tanka in its new prose context, meaning is altered and sometimes radically. The presence of tanka, of course, conditions the prose also, but few commentators, in my experience, have paid attention to that circumstance.

I have been struck by the diversity of subject matter in my reading of tanka

prose, from poignant personal accounts of family life from writers such as Bob Lucky, to the lyrical pieces favoured by Michael McClintock, through to the travelogues composed by writers such as Jane Reichhold and Miriam Sagan, or dramatic, historical accounts such as your own chilling ‘The Trial of Dorothy Talbye, 1638’. There is clearly much scope within this versatile genre. Do you envisage any limits to the possible routes it might take?

I share your assessment of tanka prose, Claire, as wide-ranging. Its boundaries, if circumscribed at all, may coincide largely with the breadth, or lack thereof, of the poetic imagination and skill of the form’s practitioners. The norm in contemporary practice, to date, has been a composition of modest length that may be most easily characterized as an abbreviated memoir or confessional anecdote, the crystallization of one significant event or experience in the author’s life. Departures from that model do not often involve expansion or greater length but, instead, represent a shift away from a focus on the writer’s person in favor of a text that is engaged in literary allusion, in ekphrasis or in what, for lack of a precise term, I might call prose poetry.

One noteworthy exception to this observation can be found in the rapid development, in 2008 and 2009, of an English equivalent of the Japanese poem tale fictions that lie close, in origin, to folklore and children’s stories. An inspiration and model for these attempts can be found in the fairytale-like qualities

of the ninth century *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori monogatari*); they also bear traces of the Brothers Grimm and of the French tales of Charles Perrault and Madame d’Aulnoy. Ingrid Kunschke, in ‘Thistledown,’ personifies the wind and, in her brisk opening, establishes a gentle, wistful tone that typifies her contribution to this recent turn in tanka prose:

That night the wind died down.

I’ve had enough, he said to himself.
Who cares anyway? No one does.
Not for me, that is. And he lay down
to sleep among the thistles at the far
end of the meadow.²¹

Giselle Maya, in “Wild Boars Enchanted,” situates the mysterious in the commonplace activities of our daily existence:

As I was painting ochre pigment
onto the walls of my little stone
cabanon at dusk, I heard some
crackling of branches, as though
someone were coming to visit.
Sometimes Madame Bosio brings
me iris roots or comes with her dog
to chat a while . . .²²

This touching, personal revelation of the poet in her garden functions as a prelude to her discovery of a family of wild boars who, magically possessed of the power of speech, plead for refuge. A local hunter later catches sight of the matriarch of this boar clan, is transformed into a

boar and pleads with the poet for a kiss to reverse the charm. Such is the world of the poem tale in tanka prose!

To look ahead, however, is often to look behind and, in speculating about new avenues for tanka prose tomorrow, to revisit yesterday. In Japan, there are extended histories and biographies, military chronicles and diaries, travelogues and tales. I see no fixed barrier to the ambition of tanka prose in English, no reason why it cannot parallel or rival its classical ancestor in variety and in scale.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Woodward, "A Record of Semimaru," *Modern English Tanka* V2, N2, Winter 2007, p. 174.
2. Jeffrey Woodward, Ed., *The Tanka Prose Anthology*, Modern English Tanka Press, 2008, p. 10.
3. Laurel Rasplica Rodd, *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*, Cheng & Tsui, 1996, pp. 121-143.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
5. Shiki Masaoka, *Songs from a Bamboo Village*, translated by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda. Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1998, p. 247.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
7. Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu, Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs*, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 231.
8. Dru Philippou, "Sloughing Off," *Haibun Today* V5, N1, March 2011.
9. Jeffrey Woodward, "Prose and Verse in Tandem: Haibun and Tanka Prose," *Modern Haibun & Tanka Prose* 2, Winter 2009, p. 158, and n. 13, pp. 162-163.
10. Helen Craig McCullough, *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology*, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 111-112.
11. Edwin A. Cranston, *A Waka Anthology: Volume One The Gem-Glistening Cup*, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 309.
12. Michael McClintock, "Before Croissants and Coffee," *Modern Haibun & Tanka Prose* 1, Summer 2009, p. 129.
13. Jeffrey Woodward, "The Elements of Tanka Prose," *Modern English Tanka* V2, N4, Summer 2008, p. 194.
14. Sanford Goldstein, "Not Again! Tanka Strings and Sequences," *Atlas Poetica* 5, Spring 2010, p. 65.
15. Cranston, *op. cit.*, pp. 552-554; Ian Hideo Levy, *The Ten Thousand Leaves: A Translation of the Manyōshū, Volume One*, Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 371-375; and *1000 Poems from the Manyōshū: The Complete Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai Translation*, Dover Publications, 2005, pp. 258-259.
16. Ray Rasmussen, "Terra Incognita: The World of Haibun and Tanka Prose," *Contemporary Haibun Online* V5, N4, December 2009.
17. Meredith McKinney, *The Tale of Saigyō*, Michigan Papers in Japanese Studies, No. 25, Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Press, 1998. p. 35.
18. Bob Lucky, "Three," in *The Tanka Prose Anthology*; *op. cit.*, p. 76.
19. Jeffrey Woodward, "The Road Ahead for Tanka in English," *Modern English Tanka* V2, N2, Winter 2007, p. 181.
20. Denis M. Garrison, "Dreaming Room," *Modern English Tanka* V1, N3, Spring 2007, p. 4.
21. Ingrid Kunschke, "Thistledown," *Modern Haibun & Tanka Prose* 1, Summer 2009, p. 71.
22. Giselle Maya, "Wild Boars Enchanted," *Haibun Today* (Nov. 26, 2008). □