Poetry and Melancholy: Jeffrey Woodward's Another Garden

Reviewed by Charles Tarlton

Introduction of black is the key to the late intensity
of color, the foil for his generous palette . . . . (1)

The first four sections of *Another Garden*, a hundred pages or so, are made up of selections from Woodward's tanka, tanka sequences, and tanka prose. These are in turn divided up into four sections: *A Deck of Cards*, *Partial Census*, *Blue Flag*, and *The Simple News*. A fifth and final section, *Lagniappe*, contains two influential essays by Woodward and an interview with Woodward conducted by Claire Everett. All three of these prose pieces deal with Woodward's views of the history and future of tanka and tanka prose in English. I will consider the poetry first and then at the end turn briefly to the critical writings.

waste places and disturbed sites

Right across the poems in *Another Garden* we can detect a persistent underlying rhythm of melancholy. There are poems about faded youth, about lost and faithless love, about dashed hopes and dreams; there are poems about lives ground down by misfortune, failure, madness, death, resignation, and routine, and there are poems about regret and foreboding. Here and there, the poet musters up brief moments of ironic optimism in which he takes a stand for hope or even happiness against these tendencies, but like stick writing on the beach, the waves of fatalism wash up again to all but erase these.

Still, pathos in the tone and subject of the poems does not necessarily mean despair in the act of poeticizing; a poet may write of misspent youth or love betrayed but still do so in ways that allow poet, poem, and reader to find solace at another level. Viewed in this way, the poetic act is an example of what Kenneth Burke called—"equipment for living." Facing pain, sadness, or fear through the language and structure of the poem allows us to get over them, to stare into the abyss symbolically and survive it.

Dreams Deferred

It was the common perhaps even required ambition of young American men of a certain generation to defy convention and devote themselves to the bohemia of Art—poetry, novels, and paintings for their own sake, made in poverty, on drugs, or as expressions of social and sexual alienation. Everyone can readily identify icons of this dream—Salinger and Vonnegut, Eliot and Ginsburg, Rothko and Motherwell. But, for every aspiring young talent who achieved artistic success in this mode, there were thousands more for whom the dream fizzled and they had to drop the show and earn a living.

Many of Woodward's poems zero in on this storyline. There is the young man posed in romantic garb, armed with a book of poetry, and his head filled with the artistic heroics of Rimbaud, who has to admit to himself and us (mixing Heraclitus and Kerouac) that "no one steps twice onto the same road" (*Photograph at 19)*. In another context, while his contemporaries were choosing the way of economic success, the voice of the poem "squandered the fortune of my youth—on the luxury of reciting aloud another man's finely-tuned phrase or praising the harmony of another man's palette" (*Halo)*. But, it is not all idealism and puerile hope.

there must be a book
about this place
with such counsels as
may save me from the lonely
fall of a winter's night

In another tanka prose, Woodward celebrates the Chinese poet Tao Qian, "who chose the rudeness of the common country path over the

sophisticated corridor of imperial preferment, the patient poverty of studious seclusion over the ready riches of a busy courtier's life" (*Peach Blossom Spring).* Tao Qian's poem of the same title, a utopian fantasy of a daydreaming fisherman, betrays a common longing, "the same today and yesterday."

in a time of war
I too would flee here
peach blossoms
scatter and color
a villager's white hair

* * *

I too would sit
with the ancient ones
for a time
in the delicate shade
of peach blossoms

Peach blossoms here symbolize leaving the world behind in the pursuit of Art, but tellingly, Woodward puts them in a daydream, like the attitudes struck by the self-conscious youths perched above the river in *Woodberry Tavern*, who drink tequila neat, and "speak of Velásquez as if he were one of our crew" (*Woodberry Tavern).*

The young poet who looks out from these recollections is, of course, long gone. He exists now only in Woodward's artfully rendered nostalgia as a green and hopeful spirit whose future was, when these snapshots were taken, unknown. Woodward leaves it there, and does not drag that youth's precise fate into the picture, as if he meant to preserve that innocence.

through a withered garden

But, there is another voice in these poems, an older and wiser voice that is not so green, a bruised voice that talks almost wholly in pessimistic terms about—love—as a tug-of-war between fond, fleeting, and sexy memories, on the one hand, and a *residuum* of heartbreak, on the other. Here are some scattered small examples of the former—

she lies on her back
in the cool grass awhile
a winding stream
nearby parallel
a cloud in the sky

my taste inclined
through a long dry season
to stone and water . . .
but now it is there, for love,
in the tangles of your hair

But such moments of ardor are rhythmically counterpoised by darker sentiments like this—

though the mayfly
may not live to
love tomorrow
in loving tonight he
outlives your vow

or this one, even more bitterly—

lying on her side
pretty chin propped up
in her hand she
looks girlishly innocent
and yet she lies

These short bitter lamentations on false love, betrayal, and loneliness recur right across the text, like currants in a scone (so that you get one in almost every bite). Here is one last example—

long incised upon
an upright slate of stone
the now illegible
but once familiar name
of one left here alone

Not only does this theme of lost or betrayed love recur regularly in Woodward's individual tanka, it is also the central focus of three of his major tanka prose—*Souvenir, Venetian Blinds,* and *Morro Bay.* Crucially positioned as these works are at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the poetry in this book, they remind us of the central importance here of the pathos surrounding

physical love. They demand and will reward a closer look.

In *Souvenir* Woodward has constructed a nearly perfect tanka envelope—one tanka, a bit of prose, and another tanka. In the first tanka the poet looks up to catch an adventitious glimpse of a girl in a *popular pub*—

light falls from her hair
onto a gold necklace
and lapis lazuli
a carafe's close shadow
of cerulean blue

Directly, this reminds the poet of someone—"you in high summer here at my side your eastern city far behind." But the poet is disturbed by the vision and abruptly leaves "that shimmering aura where it lingers with an admirer about a corner table." Nevertheless, the "shadow" of the remembered "you" dogs the poet out into the darkness of October, "into a sudden evening into a windy street."

We are set up, at this point, for some further poignant revelations: what is so disturbing? we want to know. The poet immediately obliges with this closing tanka.

if I turn back now
and look to the east
the heavens blacken

A setting of dire intonation if ever there was one; and then we get this—

where tonight you lie at ease
beside another.

A second, seedier narrative can be found in the tanka sequence—*Venetian Blinds.* Love affairs that begin in "a rented room / with a single window" offer, perhaps, a fleeting ecstasy, but seldom real happiness. The interior of the room delivers a temporary "intimacy," yes, but there is something foreboding in these tanka lines—

her high heels click
a door clicks to

And then, reversing the more sanguine logic of the tanka prose, *The Silence that Inhabits Houses,* about Matisse's painting of a room in which the color black is featured and in which bleak faceless readers gaze upon a wordless book, the Venetian blinds here are drawn to shut out the items present in both poems, the "royal palm and seaside view." Though closed, the blinds do not block everything, but—

let the midday light and palm
pass through to stripe
peach and green a satin sheet
and sleeping woman too

But the woman who was—

nakedly there
before

is now fully clothed and—

the interior
intimately
ebbs away
with the click of her heels
with the tide of the bay

And, then she is gone, because erotic suggestion, as Woodward hints in another tanka prose also containing disturbing blank faces (this time a clock's), is consubstantial with the ebbing away of "the primal tidal sway" (*The Black Clock).*

Casual liaisons rise up to frustrate the longing for real love in the tanka prose, *Morro Bay*, when the poet wakes through "the slit of my rum-soaked eyes and stare[s] offshore past the stranger whose satin robe parts innocently as she tosses back her platinum pageboy with bangs and I taste the salt in the air." And, here comes the tide again—

a seaworthy trawler
called from night
fishing to port
rolls with a billow
in the morning glare

Lest we imagine the scene here to be more genteel than previous assignations, the poet quickly disabuses us. "Somewhere between midnight and dawn," he discloses at the end, "I misplaced her name. She did not ask me and I did not tell her mine" (*Morro Bay)*.

We can perhaps treat this one last tanka as a summary of the Woodwardian outlook on the transience of love—

I did not flinch but
closely weighed her every word
and only then walked out
as I'd walked in, alone
through a withered garden

Bleak, Disheartening Travelogues

once seaworthy, indeed, but
lately beached and left to rot

Woodward's choice of persons and places to "visit" in his tanka prose tends toward the desolate and the piteous. Not all of his poems eulogize bleakness, of course, many focus on more comforting topics—beauty and tenderness. Still, the larger part of his attention is devoted to stories of indigence, madness, dejection, isolation, failure, and affliction. Listen to some representative and general observations—

the grass is withered
and every flower
of the field also
their proud colors muted now
muddied red, gray or brown

the stunted pine
that I planted years ago
still stands there
stooped over
refusing to grow

like the weight of
a great stone to
the calloused hand
now stonily numb
this winter sun

In the space remaining I would like to pursue this last thread by an examination of three of Woodward's tanka prose: *Tor House, Needles by Night,* and *Seamen's Bethel, New Bedford,* each dark and bleak in its own way.

In *Tor House* Woodward recounts a visit to Robinson Jeffers's stone house in Carmel, California. A sad, inevitable, and deterministic outlook saturates the poem, although to be strictly honest, it is not said to be Woodward's view so much as Jeffers's—"man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die."(2) Jeffers is depicted as building *Tor House,* his stone house-edifice of granite boulders hauled with great effort from the beach against all odds. Then, ironically, we hear Jeffers's own words again—

The square-limbed Roman letters
Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain

Robinson Jeffers's pessimism was not unfounded; in time his headland at Carmel was stuffed with the newer sort of expensive houses, about which James Tate has more recently written—

your strange carbuncular creation,
now rented to trillionaire non-
literary folk from Pasadena.
Edged in on all sides by trilevel
pasteboard phantasms . . . . (3)

Woodward's sympathetic lament turns back upon itself, though, as he seems to realize that he, the same as all the other tourists, has "come now to marvel at your handiwork, even now to rest their hands upon your stone." The wear and tear that erodes whole civilizations, the inexorable grinding down by Time about which Jeffers had waxed so philosophically has not in this case happened. The stones in the present still appear to be eternal, only the context has changed, has become urbanized, and in Woodward's words, Jeffers is left only to lament his loss of "an unbroken field of poppy and lupin." The tanka that finish this poem carry the dismal mood to the end—

not far from the house
I find the wind-worn
Monterey cypress
did you plant this one,
this gaunt one, this evergreen

go, then, with the grain
of this, your granite—
I see you there, a child
of the wind, of the tide . . .
and brother to a stone

The tanka prose *Needles by Night* causes odd reverberations in me when I read it. I grew up in San Bernardino County, California, where Needles, being on the California-Arizona border, is the most eastern city. As boy and much later, I have crossed and re-crossed that desert in all sorts of old and new cars. It is a remote and desolate place in the day, eerie in the headlights of a car at night.

Woodward manages to give expression to all this in his repetition, at the beginning of each prose passage and in the first following tanka, of the words "coming into Needles." The anticipation generated is then thwarted, of course, because (as Gertrude Stein said about Oakland) "there is no there there." You no more than come into Needles, then you are as quickly out—

coming into Needles
only to pass through
and quickly
into the wide desert
of the night again

With each of the poem's "re-entries" we are: "at the end of a blistering day;" or "on the dusty coattail of a bit of night wind and heat lightning;" or "on the sly and under cover of darkness;" or, finally, "by way of the main street 10:30 p.m. a digital bank clock remarks for the record 112 Fahrenheit . . . ." The desolation of the desert at Needles is further reinforced by two dramatic images that punctuate the tanka—

and every hour or so the ghost
of tumbleweed floats on the road

and then this at the very end—

and gray and scraggly through
the halo of your high-beams
the trickster coyote

Needles "here" is surely not so much a place as a stage or phase on an otherwise unspecified and, perhaps, pointless journey.

In some ways, I have saved the clearest example of the melancholic tone of Woodward's overall vision for last. *Seamen's Bethel, New Bedford*, recounts Woodward's visit to the chapel commemorating dead whalers and fishermen in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Woodward mixes history (the story of the Chapel and its dedication to the dangers of sailing) and literature (episodes by Melville from and about *Moby Dick).*

Once the mood has been set by a brief (is it original to our poet?) sea shanty, we learn of the "[t]hirty-one cenotaphs on the wall that name and number the men who did not dock again, at this port"—one fell to his death from the mast, one taken by a shark, one simply lost at sea. We learn in rapid succession that Melville was amazed at the "actual cannibals" hanging around the town, "savages outright."

The dead sailors died for lamp oil, "dipped with whalers in the blood of their prey, the flesh and harpoon together cleansed." In Ahab's mad terms, as he baptizes the harpoon, *"Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris*," he says, "*sed nomine diaboli.*" Death at sea, Ahab's madness, the moralism of Quaker merchants, all come together in the anathema of this chapel, dedicated to exactly what—a sailor's dangerous life and death, racial curiosity, moral and religious posturing—"this salt-cured and seasick chapel?"

The tanka prose concludes in bleak terms. "The winter light of New England is constant and pewter on the panes. I rise to take my leave but the thirty-one tablets stay, the winding-sheet of the wind unraveling below in the harbor."

I've sat in this pew, then,
not unpredictably far
back from the pulpit . . .

I shut the chapel door, sleet
on the cobbles of Johhny Cake Hill

We might end, then, with Father Mapple's (Melville's own creation) *paean* to gloom, delivered in this very chapel, "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale!"

In summing up, I want to bring forward one last tanka tucked away at the end of a section entitled "Resident Angel." This tanka summarizes for me the overall tone and sentiment of *Another Garden.* It is a gem.

no way to skip it
but I toss the stone
sidearm nonetheless
and listen to it clatter
across the frozen river

The poet resolved to encompass his experience in this collection, no matter that the effort might reverberate in unexpected, harsh, and often bleak caverns.

Coda: On Tanka Prose

Finally, Jeffrey Woodward's *Another Garden* provides us with clear examples of his formal and pedagogical contributions to the promotion of tanka prose in the West. Appended to the poetry is a section entitled, *Lagniappe: Two Essays, One Interview*, containing three seminal prose contributions by Woodward, each of which displays his knowledge and erudition in the history and exportation of Japanese poetic forms.

These essays will appeal especially to poets and readers curious about other forms of widening, so to speak, the context surrounding the individual tanka poem, as in tanka sequences and the like. But, there is a second and more important thread in these essays that concerns the question of tanka prose in the history of literary genres. Here is Woodward at his best:

> 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.

We must presume, of course (if only to be logical), some limit which lyrical innovation cannot exceed without breaking its link to tanka prose *per se*, but, luckily, no one now can say exactly what or where that limit lies (although, of course, some editors would like to chain tanka and tanka prose to their own diffident and mechanical restrictions). At the center of Woodward's contribution in this connection is the idea that, whatever its origins, tanka prose has now been assimilated into Western poetry and is more or less free to follow where the poets writing it want to take it. Art not edict will dictate the future of tanka prose; better, as it were, alive than dead.

The push and pull between prose passage and five-line poem when set over against each other is always complicated. To prescribe any one kind of relation here as more correct, as purer, or more legitimate would stymie the potential flowering of the form. What I mean is this: sometimes an effective tanka prose arises from the harmony of the prose and the poem, from the derivation of one from the other; but other times it might as easily arise from a conflict between them, from the spark generated by the two in unnatural proximity; and, finally, a powerful tanka prose might also grow out of far more oblique connections, as when, for example, the poet seeks to induce the poem by provoking marginal, hidden, or anachronistic aspects of the prose to generate one or a series of more or less dissonant tanka. Tanka prose can find inspiration not only from its Vermeers and Mozarts, but also from its equivalents of Cy Twombly and Philip Glass.

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San Francisco/Dublin
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Notes

(1) Jeffrey Woodward, Another Garden (Detroit: Tournesol Books, 2013) Pp. 13-178.

(2) To the Stone-Cutters

Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you fore defeated
Challengers of oblivion
Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits, records fall down,
The square-limbed Roman letters
Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well
Builds his monument mockingly;
For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the brave sun
Die blind and blacken to the heart:
Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained thoughts found
The honey of peace in old poems.
1924

(3) "Failed Tribute to the Stonemason of Tor House," Robinson Jeffers, *Selected Poems (*1991*)*.

January, A Tanka Diary by M. Kei

Reviewed by Patricia Prime

January: A Tanka Diary by M. Kei
Keibooks, Perryville, Maryland, USA, 2013
$US 18.00.
Available from Amazon as a Kindle e-book for $US 5.00.

M. Kei is a distinguished author, poet and editor of *Atlas Poetica.* His latest poetic offering, *January: A Tanka Diary*, is a collection of 640 tanka of which 220 are unpublished. The rest have been collected from the tanka he has written and published in many venues. Finely articulated, the poems range from resonant lyricism to breezy pleasantries to dense poems about life, death and everything in between.

The tanka present a refreshing variety of content and one is drawn to the honesty and immediacy of his thoughts and observations. The title is appropriate, not only in a metaphorical sense but also because the tanka refer specifically to a year in the life of the poet beginning from the cold and dreary month of January and continuing until the following January. Each tanka appears on a monthly basis on the day on which it was written.

In these tanka images of processes in nature and of the natural world are analogues of feelings and intuitions which cannot be expressed in any other way. Descriptions of the scenes, the birds, the water, the plants, set the mood and measure the emotions. Images and the language that contains them evoke happiness, love, sex, pain, joy, sadness and loss.

Perhaps one has to shift into another gear to read this poetry, with its quiet, confident rhythm that links the poet to the world known and unknown. Sometimes the tanka are presented in a traditional juxtaposition of human and natural elements, as in the first tanka:

a fresh leaf
white in the winter
of a new year;
it seems a shame
to mar it with words

Just as effective are those tanka which are a form of analyzing what will happen after we are dead and gone:

when the world of men is gone,
who will scatter
the ashes of our existence,
who will place the memorial
of our dying?

The authentic voice of the poet can be heard in many of the poems, including those that seem to come wholly from nature: