

***Introduction to
The Tanka Prose Anthology***

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Gary LeBel, in “Rereading the *Tosa Diary*,” eloquently evokes an ancient past and binds it intimately to his contemporary domestic setting when he writes:

It’s almost midnight—tomorrow’s Christmas. As I turn the pages of the *Tosa Diary* I smell the sea and feel my cold soles’ impress on the shingle; I hear those ancient pines whose roots are ‘splashed by waves.’ The rowers pull hard as a woman intones verses for the dead amid the long, elegant robes I peek in on my sleeping daughter, and then shut the door.

LeBel alludes to the masterpiece of a Japanese nobleman, Ki no Tsurayuki, who wrote over a millennium ago from the point-of-view of a woman diarist who, on a difficult sea-journey, is mourning her lost child.[1] Perhaps the literary convention of the persona allowed Lord Tsurayuki to distance himself somewhat from his deep grief over the recent death of his own daughter. The *Tosa Diary* that LeBel is immersed in is saturated with cold waves, rough shingle on desolate beaches and the ever-brooding pines of islands and shorelines. LeBel, enjoying Christmas Eve in the comfort of his home, is stirred by the ancient keening to set his reading aside and to “peek in on my sleeping daughter,” a desire for parental reassurance which is elicited directly by his affinity for Tsurayuki’s writing: “... I smell the sea and feel my cold soles’ impress on the shingle”

LeBel's paragraph of prose is concluded by a single tanka and Tsurayuki's longer diary includes over fifty of them, so both poets employ a similar form which marries prose and verse. It is the desire and ability of a contemporary American poet in Georgia to span the centuries and receive inspiration and even consolation from the Japanese nobleman, however, that lies at the core of this introduction and provides a motive for this anthology. What is this form that LeBel and Tsurayuki share in common, then, and what is its provenance?

Tanka Prose in Classical and Medieval Japanese Literature

The dominant form of poetry for over one thousand years in Japan was waka, the forerunner of our modern-day tanka, which in its classical and medieval norm consists of five lines or phrases of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.[2] From the compilation of the oldest surviving collections of poetry, the *Kojiki* and *Man'yōshū* of the 8th century, prose very often accompanied waka, a practice that continued through the classical and medieval court periods and into the new tanka reform ushered in by Masaoka Shiki in the early 20th century.[3] The anecdotal and episodic properties of this ancient prose, along with formulaic phrases and other traits, bear traces of oral transmission and point ultimately to its pre-literate beginnings.[4]

Early exemplars of tanka prose might be best appreciated as framing or contextual devices—rudimentary prose accompaniments—that tersely describe the place and circumstance of a tanka's composition or, with slightly more elaboration, deliver an abbreviated tale that establishes not only a setting but perhaps a character or characters for one or more tanka. The prose of this period is rarely more than a handmaiden to the poem.[5]

With the advent of Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* and the anonymously compiled *Tales of Ise* in the mid-tenth century, however, Japanese prose evolved rapidly and tanka quickly found itself in a baffling variety of prose contexts: diary or memoir, travel account, military chronicle, romance, biography and more. Nor was the prose now invariably subservient to the verse but in works like Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*, frequently cited as the world's first novel, or the Nun Abutsu's *Utatane*, a memoir of the unrequited love of her eighteenth year, the prose and verse are on an equal footing, with now one, now the other, stepping to the fore.[6]

The above paragraphs offer only a cursory sketch of the origin of tanka prose—in another language, another culture, another historical and social milieu. How and when did this mixed genre “cross-over” and find advocates and practitioners among poets writing in English?

Brief History of Tanka Prose in English

Any appreciation of the development of tanka and tanka prose in English requires acknowledgement that the growing practice and popularity of Japanese verse in the post-WWII period was centered upon haiku and haibun, not tanka and tanka prose. That fact is not without irony as tanka, with and without its prose companion, preceded haiku and haibun in its native land by a millennium. Western acceptance of the descendent first, the ancestor later, is therefore a striking inversion of Japanese chronology.

Haiku found able publicists early in R.H. Blyth and Harold G. Henderson. The former's four volume study and anthology, *Haiku* (1949-1952), and the latter's concise *An Introduction to Haiku* (1958) provided a broad foundation for academic study while the adoption of the form by Beat writers, like Jack

Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, brought haiku to the attention of poets and other literati.[7] The rapid dissemination of the haikai ethos and widespread practice of the form culminated as early as 1974 in recognition by a commercial publishing house with the release of *The Haiku Anthology*, edited by Cor van den Heuval.

The import of this circumstance for the history of tanka and tanka prose in English is two-fold. First, many poets came to the practice of tanka via haiku and often did so with a firm haikai aesthetic. Second, when and where poets sought to join tanka with prose, they were less likely to turn to classical and medieval Japanese models than to Matsuo Bashō's 17th century haibun masterpiece, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, and more frequently than not comprehended what they were writing as haibun and not as a separate and distinct genre, tanka prose. Clear textual evidence of this is the mixture of tanka and haiku in a single prose composition that one commonly discovers in many early essays in the genre.

Michael McClintock, Jane Reichhold, Michael Dylan Welch and Alexis Rotella, among others, are examples of poets who are still very much active and who established reputations first as writers of haiku and only later as writers of tanka. Sanford Goldstein may be exceptional insofar as his poetic activity, from the start, shows an orientation based upon tanka and upon his work in translating modern Japanese tanka masters.

Goldstein is notable as well for providing, so far as can be presently determined, the first example of tanka prose in English, his "Tanka Walk" (1983).[8] This journal of some 3000 words documents his daily exercise regimen, general observations on life in Japan and meditations upon the tanka of his professed master, Takuboku Ishikawa, while offering the counterpoint of his own tanka as well. Jane Reichhold's *A Gift*

of *Tanka* (1990), probably the next foray into tanka prose in English, is a collection that adopts the classical waka manner of prefacing many of the individual tanka with brief notes that establish a setting or explain the circumstances attending the composition of the poem in question.[9] Larry Kimmel's "Evening Walk" (1996), not collected here, alternates prose freely with tanka and haiku passages to describe the activity that his title conveys.[10] Works of tanka prose multiply after this with Jane and Werner Reichhold's journal, *Lynx*, playing a crucial role in providing a venue for the frequent publication of such compositions, especially in the period of 1997–2003. Much of this early work is executed with greater enthusiasm than finish and for understandable reasons. In 1983 or even in 1996, when Goldstein and Kimmel, for example, were attempting this hybrid, tanka was not yet widely practiced nor were there ready models or guidelines in English for the would-be writer of tanka prose. Is it possible now, a quarter of a century after Goldstein's work, to define, at least in preliminary fashion, the phenomenon of tanka prose?

Toward a Definition of Tanka Prose

Japanese criticism, ancient and modern, offers no comprehensive term that might encompass the many forms and styles that the wedding of tanka and prose admits.[11] Instead, the terminology employed in the scholarly literature is form-specific, addressing not the genus but the individual species, e.g., preface or headnote (*kotobagaki*), poem tale (*uta monogatari*), literary diary (*nikki bungaku*), travel account (*kekō*), poetic collection (*shū*), historical tale (*rekishi monogatari*), military chronicle (*gunkei monogatari*) or biography (*denkei*).

The first problem to address in defining tanka prose, therefore, is nomenclature.[12] Whereas Japanese waka practice and literary criticism provide no precedent, the analogy of tanka plus

prose to the latter development of haibun does. The term haibun, when applied to a literary composition, most commonly signifies haiku plus prose “written in the spirit of haiku.”[13] Haiku prose or haikai prose would be an apt English equivalent of the Japanese word, haibun. Upon the same grounds, tanka prose becomes a reasonable term to apply to literary specimens that incorporate tanka plus prose—a circumstance which may lead one to inquire, not unreasonably, whether tanka prose also indicates prose composed in “the spirit of tanka.”

Tanka prose, like haibun, combines two modes of writing: verse and prose. Verse is metered language, that is, language measured in some fashion, whether what is counted is stress, quantity (duration), syllables, metrical feet or some other feature. In Japanese literature, tanka and haiku established metrical norms based on syllabic count. Tanka and haiku commonly abandoned syllabic meter in 20th century Japan and the adoption of the two forms in the West has widely followed suit.[14]

Tanka prose, then, is a hybrid of these two modes of writing and one can extrapolate from this circumstance a basic unit or building block—one paragraph, one tanka—that fulfills, at a minimum, the expectation aroused by the name.[15] Tanka prose, of course, is not limited to our basic unit but allows many compound variations of this unit as well. The variation in the number and placement of tanka in relation to the prose also strongly affects the character of individual compositions and is a prime source of the great variety that is evident in the genre. Let us discuss, then, the chief variations in form that the reader will meet in tanka prose.

One prose paragraph plus one tanka constitutes not only our fundamental building block but also that order of the two modes most commonly found in contemporary tanka prose. Larry Kimmel’s “New England Palms” is representative:

Somewhere between weed and tree, the sumacs
that jungle my unkempt property. I like them.
My neighbors don't. I call them New England
palms.

cliffside cottage
blue hills in the distance
here I would be
a Ryokan
or a Han Shan

The simplest variation one meets therefore is inversion of this
order, the shift from prose as preface to prose as afterword for
the tanka component as in this entry from Jane Reichhold's
diary, *Her Alone*:

a night sky
lit only by planets
dark waters
have forgotten the name
of Moon Lake

Why do I feel that Heidi, too, was awake before
dawn, standing behind the tripod, waiting for
the first pink and blue to leak across the waters
before her? Even if Moon Lake was not the
best pre-dawn shot, maybe she was up just
because she wanted to get an early start on her
day. Or because it was too exciting to sleep any
longer

Whether the prose in question precedes or follows the verse,
compounding of either or both elements also occurs and, like
inversion, is not without a curious power to alter the tone and
flavor of tanka prose.

The envelope is a compound form that is not rare in tanka prose. Here, one element is enclosed by the other, whether that order is prose–tanka–prose (a prose envelope) or, conversely, tanka–prose–tanka (a verse envelope). This extract from Sanford Goldstein’s “Tanka Walk” is a prose envelope:

A toothless man does kneebends just at the curve in the road before he turns right to enter the bathhouse provided for the elderly by the prefectural government. A tanka. Old women carrying sun umbrellas or bunches of flowers. Lovers in a seaside Toyota. A salesman practicing his smile in a Datsun mirror. Or myself at the midway point on a certain morning:

this gray
anatomy of indifference;
I sit on a bench
along a seaside
road

. . . Or:

I pass
a bag of bones
in kimono,
face
lifted to sun

. . . Tanka and more tanka. Is it any wonder I have been able to spill at least ten tanka a day and that I have been doing so for sixteen years except for two years following the death of my wife in this same city of Niigata nine years ago?

Alternating prose and tanka elements, however, will be met more commonly than any other compound form. Bob Lucky's "The Way" is an efficient and charming example:

I am the ass Lao Tzu rode into the West. I am
the ass that knew the way. The cost of leaving
the kingdom is a semblance of wisdom.

hastily scribbling
his lines down
Lao Tzu
never looks up
until the final stroke

We pass through the gate, the sun eating our
shadows all morning then spitting them out
behind us later in the day. Lao Tzu holds on as
long as he can. I take him as far as I can go.

a dust storm gathers
on the horizon—
that bit about water,
Lao Tzu laughs,
may have been premature

With every possible compound variation, it is worthwhile to remember that the ratio of prose to tanka is not fixed at one to one but may be varied at the poet's discretion and the exigencies of the particular matter at hand.

The structure of tanka prose, then, can be adequately described as beginning with our basic unit of one paragraph, one tanka and extending to the many variations briefly discussed above. That structure, in principle and theory at least, can be applied to the different sub-genres known through classical and medieval

Japanese literature, such as preface, poem tale, memoir, romance, chronicle, biography and even essay. It may or may not admit more, depending upon the evolving practice of modern poets writing in another language and another cultural milieu.

Earlier, in comparing tanka prose to haibun, I stated that it would be reasonable to anticipate that the prose element would be “written in the spirit of tanka.” This implies that tanka prose differs qualitatively from haibun—not only that tanka and haiku differ, but that their prose accompaniment does as well. What precisely this tanka spirit entails is a question beset with many problems and potential controversies. Some poets will cite various Japanese aesthetic touchstones such as *aware* (pathos), *wabi* (austere beauty) or even *yūgen* (depth or mystery), despite the obscurity, even on its home turf, of the latter. [16] Other poets will perceive tanka’s spirit from the viewpoint of common Western critical concepts such as understatement, paradox, overtone or ambiguity. Given an absence of consensus, it would be wise to recognize that poets—many of whom may be content to grasp such matters intuitively—will determine the nature of the spirit of tanka by their own evolving practice.

Common Traits of the Tanka Prose in this Anthology

The basic structure of tanka prose can be defined with reasonable confidence but aesthetic issues, such as the nature of “the spirit of tanka,” prove far more resistant to clear delimitation. General observations of common traits or tendencies in tanka prose, however, can be made based upon the writings in this anthology. Certain of these characteristics parallel what the reader may find in classical and medieval Japanese tanka prose; others, not too surprisingly, diverge from Japanese precedent.

Diaries and memoirs play a central role in the development of Japanese tanka prose from its infancy in Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* (935 A.D.) to such late works as the renga master Sōgi's *Journey to Shirakawa* (1468 A.D.).[17] Diaries and memoirs differ insofar as a diary commonly has dated, episodic entries and is composed around the present or, at a minimum, maintains a pretense that events are happening now, whereas a memoir generally eschews the form of a log book and compresses time and action, whether present or past, into a more nearly continuous narrative flow.[18]

Jane Reichhold, in *Hawai'i with Heidi* (2001) and *Her Alone* (2002), wrote two exemplary diaries from which extracts are offered here. The first concerns Reichhold's travels with her eldest daughter Heidi; the second dwells upon her maternal worries and longing in her daughter's absence on a hike in the Sierras. These two diaries, to that extent, might be viewed as twins, their central motifs, respectively, being the presence and absence of the loved child. Miriam Sagan's "Hospice Haibun" documents, in dated form, an interval of just over one week, from the day that her mother-in-law comes home, "hospice style," to the day of her funeral. Sagan's work, a meditation upon impending death, mixes haiku and tanka freely with its prose, the prose itself is frequently clipped and abbreviated, and the title strongly suggests that the poet intended to write haibun. The presence of tanka, albeit only two, is uncharacteristic and perhaps no work in the current anthology is as close to contemporary haibun proper. Sagan's tanka color the whole and lend an air of newness, however, with a promise of greater things to come:

Claire died at 6:30 pm. My husband Rich was sitting in the room with her, doing the crossword puzzle by himself.

How odd
To see the timed lamp
Blink on
After
You'd gone

Gary LeBel's "Sea-change," while not a diary, should be noted here—not only for its structural similarity to the diaries but quite simply for its novel approach and spirit of artistic adventure. The chronology of "Sea-change" is found in nine dated letters and eight tanka that constitute both an epistolary fiction and imaginary life that is based upon a historical figure—William Horton, owner of an 18th century plantation on Jekyll Island, Georgia.

Three works in the present collection eschew dates for unity of action, place and time. "Tanka Walk" by Sanford Goldstein was cited in the brief remarks above on the history of tanka prose as perhaps the first example in English of the genre. The prose in Goldstein's work is divided between a narrative of this day, this specific walk, and a memoir-like retrospective meditation upon this same walk, this same path that has served, on many previous days, both as his daily exercise regimen and his tanka discipline. Linda Jeannette Ward's "Pigeon Mountain" covers a five-day retreat at a convent of the Cistercian Order and is composed in the present tense throughout. Like Sagan, Ward alternates haiku and tanka with her prose but the smoother flow of the prose as well as the greater presence of tanka places "Pigeon Mountain" much closer to the Japanese memoir tradition and to tanka prose in general. Michael Dylan Welch, in "Hand in Hand," memorializes September 11, 2001 and his personal response to the violence and tragedy of that day; his use of tanka only and his skillful writing convey a degree of stoic acceptance and classical restraint.

The line between fact and fiction in tanka prose is not always clearly discernible whether the form employed is memoir or diary or yet other alternative forms we have yet to discuss. This is true of most literary genres, if not all, for the simple fact that literature is art and aesthetic values can and do overshadow considerations of fidelity to specific chronology, phenomena and events. Some tanka prose, however, leans more openly toward pure fiction by its very artifice. This is so in LeBel's "Sea-change," as he explains in a brief preface, but one suspects as much, also, of a complex narrative like Stanley Pelter's "the short straw," where the elderly woman, who is the subject of this stark study of a decline in health and competence, is presented in a repetitive diction that approximates incantation in its accumulative power. Pelter, true to his modernist sympathies, presents the woman and her caretakers from multiple points-of-view as well with only slight variations with each return to the scene.

Another departure from reportage or fact-as-fact lies in the tendency of certain writers and certain works to adopt oneiric qualities. This may or may not be the case with Pelter's "the short straw" but it is clearly so in his very short work, "a hill blows up," where the imagery of a piano tilted in the air, of black gloves and a white gull (a reflection of the instrument's keyboard) possesses a logic that can only be called the logic of dreams. Hortensia Anderson, in "Maybe You Can Come Home," and Werner Reichhold, in "Shortly," are engaged in similar acts of abandonment or possession. Anderson's tanka prose is a nightmarish *mise en scène* where flowers wilt before "the scent of death" and where the "ice blue eyes" of the threatening Commandante seem to justify his "kindly" assertion, "I shall take rememberings by dismemberings." The stage in Werner Reichhold's "Shortly" is neither as brooding as Anderson's nor as animated as Pelter's but, instead, borrows the pastoral trappings of a peaceable kingdom—a kingdom of

milkmaids, mountain goats, musicians in feathered hats and a poet in the persona of a bushtit—to lull the reader toward a dream-like state. The disjunctive shift from prose to tanka is radical but quite effective for a work of fifty or fewer words.

Much of the tanka prose literature, however, strives to adhere closely to the immediate environment and day-to-day existence of the writer, often relating experiential detail and the common-but-somehow-significant event in a manner befitting the casual anecdote. These compositions are fundamentally naturalist in orientation and recall the “sketch of life” (*shasei*) aesthetic that Masaoka Shiki imported from the West for use in Japanese haiku and tanka. Marjorie A. Buettner, for example, often discovers what might be called, for lack of a better term, revelation in her domestic surroundings—in working to repair her Grandmother’s crochet in “Work of the Weavers” or, with her children absent for a weekend, in the startling void of her house in “The Presence of Absence.” Terra Martin, in “Once Upon a Town,” returns to the village of her childhood in Ontario—now far from the “one long yawn” of her youthful memories, now transformed by investment and development into a landscape she does not recognize. Giselle Maya’s gentle and delicate works are intimately bound-up with her Provençal village. Maya sketches her fellow villagers, the medieval walls and the local cats in “A Door of Chestnut Wood” or her doctor (“a tiny birdlike lady”) in “Acupuncture”; she treats these matters with unmistakable affection and yet offers clear observations without indulging in easy sentiments. Linda Papanicolaou, in “Summer Camp,” provides a similar lively sketch of her childhood experiences at a Girl Scout summer retreat.

One substantial group of tanka prose compositions not yet discussed consists of writings that display in the prose component a tension and elevation in the diction, marked

rhythm, alliteration, assonance, even refrains—aural properties, in other words, most often associated with verse.[19] Such works might be fairly compared to the prose poems of French Symbolism, to Rimbaud or Mallarmé, and their compass, in fact, finds its orientation more frequently in the West than in the East. The reader will find various works of this nature in this collection but perhaps not one so remarkable as Patricia Prime’s “Wings Over Water”:

. . . at first glance

your head bobs from side to side like the
cautious mallard on the river a thousand words
and lines the tools of writing tucked into your
backpack in the spring when cherry blossom
petals flutter to the ground or in darkest winter
when the sun disappears behind the Kamai
Ranges

at first glance

you are a heron wings beat and legs tangle as
you swoop along the riverbank your eyes on the
light

a harrier hawk
scrolls the valley
its wings
almost touch
the azure ceiling

wildflowers
in the meadow
you scrawl
words across the page
illegibly . . .

Prime's contribution to tanka prose is also notable for the striking effects she has achieved by inverting the common order of prose first, tanka last. Her titles that adopt this format commonly start with a sequence of three or more tanka and conclude with a prose section of one or two paragraphs. "White & Red" and "La Fenêtre Ouverte (Matisse)" demonstrate the curious shift in pace and emotive power that this form allows a skilled poet to generate in the transition from verse to prose. They also offer compelling evidence of what we suspected all along—that haibun and tanka prose at their best, while distant relatives, each maintain distinct and separate households.

Reference in this introduction has been made to the fact that many writers of tanka and tanka prose wrote haiku and haibun before adopting the new genres and that this circumstance plays some role in accounting for the free use of haiku and tanka in nascent tanka prose writings. Perhaps it may explain as well the not-uncommon mixture of these two verse-forms in many contemporary tanka sequences.[20] While I've touched upon this above in a discussion of Sagan's diary and Ward's memoir, shorter works by Ward and Katherine Samuelowicz offer clear examples of the same verse-hybrid in simpler but more lyrical form. Ward and Samuelowicz both weave one haiku and one tanka into these works of tanka prose. In "Island Sunrise" and "Merchants Millpond," Ward's prose is an instrument for sensory perceptions that are finely drawn and rich in detail while the haiku and tanka reinforce the splendor of the natural setting before her. Samuelowicz, in "His Grandmother's Orange" and "Morocco May 2004," also writes a very poetic prose that is

equal to the accompanying haiku and tanka but, instead of nature as a central motif, Samuelowicz's tanka prose is fixed upon her native Poland. Whether she is returning to her current residence in Brisbane, Australia after a visit home or whether she is touring North Africa, Poland, and her distance from it, are at the core of her perceptions and emotions:

high from a house roof in the kasbah I look at
snow covered mountains at a fertile green oasis
neatly separated with a clean surgical cut
from yellowy brown desert at *kapusta* cabbage
heads in neat rows among date palms

in Chellah on Roman columns *nasze bociany*
Polish storks and *nasze malwy* our hollyhocks
against façades of palaces with their intricate
carved wood stucco and tilework *i nasze*
przydrożne maki and our red poppies among
graves of rulers long dead

Essays in the 18th century and earlier were considered high literature. Addison and Steele, Johnson and Swift—each claimed many admirers. The essay has fallen on hard times more recently and not only the general populace but literati as well often reject any claim that may be made for the essay's importance or potential as a literary genre. In China and Japan, on the other hand, the essay has enjoyed, from ancient times, a position of prestige and is the equal, in many respects, of poetry or fiction. Tao Qian (365–427), a legendary Chinese recluse, is widely admired for his rustic and outspoken verses but is perhaps most famous for his utopian essay, "Peach Blossom Spring," while Su Shi (1037–1101), one of China's greatest poets, professed equal pride in his accomplished essays, among which is "Red Cliff," one of the most frequently cited writings in the Chinese classical canon.[21] Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow*

Book, Kamo no Chōmei's *Ten Foot Square Hut* and Yoshida Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness* [22]—writings of the 11th through 13th centuries—are famous Japanese examples of the literary essay as is Matsuo Bashō's "Hut of the Phantom Dwelling." [23] Two brief examples of the essay with tanka appear in this collection. Marjorie A. Buettner's "The Poet's Cabin" commemorates a visit to the hermitage of Jun Fujita, an early proponent of tanka in North America, while offering the essayist's homage to the earlier poet. Michael Dylan Welch's "Four Favourite Tanka," while extremely short, indicates yet another path for future writers to explore in its close reading and appreciation of the tanka of two other poets.

Allusion to literary texts, to religious or philosophical tenets and to works of art is a technique common to poetry in the East and West, so it is not surprising to discover this feature in many tanka prose works. Allusion establishes the added dimension of binding the current poet to his cultural past and of inviting both poet and reader to compare or contrast now and then. Larry Kimmel, in "Who Loves to Lie with Me," has his lady antagonist quote the song "Under the Greenwood Tree," from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, as an ironic counterpoint to his disappointment at the discovery of the woman's true character. Bob Lucky, in "Ignoring Dylan Thomas Sometimes, Sometimes Not," depicts his own aging body as the vehicle for a comical evocation of the Welsh poet's "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night." Lucky does not summon Thomas's "rage against the dying of the light" but, instead, with "a sort of rolling gait," Lucky tells us, "I stumble into the night." Gary LeBel discovers himself alone in a hotel in Mitylene, Alabama, a happenstance that calls to mind Sappho's association with Mytilene on the island of Lesbos and that inspires LeBel's echo of the lament of the ancient Greek poetess for the passing of youth. Ekphrastic tanka prose—writings on the subject and form of specific works of art—find representation in current practice and in this

anthology as well. Terra Martin, in “Matisse: Woman Before an Aquarium, 1921,” captures the French painter’s motif of confinement in a finely nuanced prose that remains faithful to her original stimulus while stressing the relation between the goldfish that the cloistered woman observes and Matisse’s implied spectator. In “La Fenêtre Ouverte (Matisse),” Patricia Prime gazes through the French painter’s open window at Collioure in 1905 and invites the reader to look as well.[24] Other tanka prose examples of ekphrasis in the current collection include LeBel’s “Rooftops” and this author’s “The Silence That Inhabits Houses.”

What Does the Future Hold for Tanka Prose?

One quarter of a century ago, Sanford Goldstein wrote his “Tanka Walk” and, during the intervening period, various poets have attempted tanka prose in English. Each poet brought to this novel form a different outlook and understanding and, in some instances, the poets so engaged did not perceive what they were doing as tanka prose but as haibun.

Twenty five years is the proverbial “blink of an eye” within the context of cultural history. Practitioners of tanka prose were few, their contributions to the form in many cases infrequent and their mastery limited by the very novelty of the undertaking. Those assessments are no large criticism as one must recall, from what we have said above, that these poets were engaged in a genre which had no ready name in Japanese or English, in a genre not welcome in many publication venues, in a genre often confused by practicing poet and friendly editor alike with its distant descendent, haibun. These circumstances offered few incentives for mastering a difficult medium or coming to grips with its relation to other similar but distinct forms. Despite such very unpromising conditions, tanka prose found occasional adherents and found able realization in the work of writers like

Goldstein or Jane Reichhold, Larry Kimmel or Linda Jeannette Ward. Gary LeBel is somewhat original in having composed tanka prose in the late 90s and having continued with some regularity, over the years, to contribute to its literature; he found his own path in tanka prose by working quietly and alone, by exploring new avenues wherever they presented themselves in his continuing poetic practice. Other poets in this anthology—Patricia Prime, Bob Lucky, Linda Papanicolaou and Terra Martin among them—came to the genre relatively late, most within the past year, and adopted tanka prose’s varied forms while working directly with this editor in online discussion groups or through private correspondence.

My studies of tanka prose began in 2007 and were motivated originally not by my own writing of tanka but by a search for the solution to certain technical problems I faced in writing haibun. I soon became fascinated with the possibilities of tanka prose on its own merits and, in my researches into the literature and in my attempts to answer the inquiries of poets who worked with me, I found myself pushed repeatedly to seek solutions to perplexing questions and to offer clarifications as new problems came to the fore.

The short history of tanka prose in English affords a mere sketch or outline of what tanka prose might be. Tanka poets, in recent years, have shown a true affinity for tanka sequences and this very desire to expand the possibilities of tanka by extending its form will inevitably lead some tanka poets to turn to the example and promise of tanka prose also. Writers who come to the genre with that motivation—the search for expansive form—will find what they seek in the varied models of memoir, diary, essay, prose poetry and fiction that have a rightful place in tanka prose. It would be shortsighted not to anticipate that new practitioners, new poets with their own personal perspective and concerns, will also try new forms and that

documentary reportage, biography and other types of prose will eventually be adapted for use with tanka as well.

My wish for the reader of this volume is that if his or her encounter with tanka prose can achieve one thing only, let it be that sense of adventure, of a vast new world suddenly opening up before one, that world that Matisse viewed through his window at Collioure, that world that Patricia Prime captures in her homage to the same painter and the same window, to the “two worlds” of interior and exterior, of dark and light:

as I emerge with you
from darkness across
the ivy-garlanded sill
I enter a world
more inferred than real

can't you see
I share your lucidity
as I pass through
the open window into
a harbour of pink & red boats?

despite the dark
interior you capture
the quick-sleeved
transparency of light
dividing two worlds

Note on the Selection and Arrangement of Work in this Collection

While the intent of this collection is not primarily historical but aimed at an initial survey of the literature of tanka prose in English, historical value was weighed with perceived artistic

merit in selecting representative early compositions. No work is presented here for historical value only. Other than the anthologist's common desire to select the best work available, the great variety in form, matter and style that is already in evidence among practitioners of tanka prose inspired a determination on the editor's part to represent this diversity faithfully.

Many of the earlier works and authors present here came to my acquaintance by a private study, over the past year, of online archives of various literary journals. Jane and Werner Reichhold's *Lynx* was a particularly rich resource in this regard as were the Reichholds who were generous in supplying me, gratis, rare print copies of the journal before its transformation into a digital publication. *Lynx* has published tanka prose for a dozen years or more and continues to do so to this day. I was the recipient of another great kindness via Sanford Goldstein who, from his current residence in Japan, requested that his daughter locate and mail to me, from his personal files, a very rare copy of the 1983 issue of *Northeast* where his "Tanka Walk" first found publication.

Writings of more recent provenance came my way, most often, through my editorial work at *Haibun Today*, where I have promoted tanka prose since late 2007, or through personal associations with poets who have shared my fascination and worked with me *sub rosa*, as it were, to explore and develop the possibilities of tanka prose.

I settled upon arranging the work in the conventional Western manner—alphabetically, by author—somewhat reluctantly. Some argument might be made for presenting the work in the chronological order of its first publication or, perhaps, by grouping works according to perceived common forms or subjects. I would have preferred one of these alternatives but,

in the end, was dissuaded by the very youth and tentative nature of this enterprise where neither chronology nor common characteristics are yet clearly definitive or discernible.

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Notes

1. Helen Craig McCullough, *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 73–102.
2. Certain Japanese linguists and metrists distinguish between a syllable and mora as it applies to versification in Japanese haiku and tanka. Mora is a term that will be familiar to students of classical Greek or Latin poetry where it signifies the smallest metric unit in classical quantitative prosodies, a short syllable. Two morae, i.e., two short syllables, are by that reckoning equal to one long. While the distinction is fine and relevant to a discussion of Japanese versification, any application to English practice is particularly dubious insofar as accent in English is determinative, not quantity. See Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975) for a study of the last serious attempt to sanction quantity as a metrical paradigm in English versification. For readers interested in the subject as it pertains to Japanese verse, see Koji Kawamoto, *The Poetics of Japanese Verse: Imagery, Structure, Meter* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1999). One theoretical view of why these matters may be pertinent for practitioners of English-language haiku or tanka can be read in Richard Gilbert and Judy Yoneoka, “Haiku Metrics and Issues of Emulation—New Paradigms for Japanese and English Haiku Form,” *Language Issues*, V6, N1 (2000). Available at: <<http://research.iyume.com/metrics/haikumet.html>>, last accessed on May 19, 2008.
3. Mildred M. Tahara, *Tales of Yamato: A Tenth-Century Poem-Tale* (Honolulu, HI: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980), 166–168. Cf. Laurel Rasplica Rodd and Mary Catherine Henkenius, *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (Boston, MA: Cheng & Tsui Company, 1996, first edition, 1984), 20–21.

4. Jin'ichi Konishi, *A History of Japanese Literature* (in two volumes) with Earl Miner, Editor, and Aileen Gatten, Translator (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), I, 251–265; I, 365–373; I, 418–430. Cf. McCullough, op. cit., 7–8.
5. Meredith McKinney, *The Tale of Saigyō* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Papers in Japanese Studies, No. 25, Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Press, 1998), 13–14. Cf. H. Jay Harris, *The Tales of Ise* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1972), 23. In an earlier paper on tanka prose, I maintained the useful distinction between the early waka practice of preface (*kotobagaki*) and poem tale (*uta monogatari*) as a means of illustrating some of the simplest but most effective forms of tanka prose; see “The Road Ahead for Tanka in English,” *Modern English Tanka*, V2, N2 (2007), 179–187. Available at: <<http://www.shortverse.com/digital/2007d/articletheroadaheadfortankainenglishbyjeffreywoodward.html>>, last accessed on May 19, 2008.
6. Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 27–28.
7. William J. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 63–64.
8. Sanford Goldstein, “Tanka Walk,” *Northeast* III:15 (1983), 26–32.
9. Jane Reichhold, *A Gift of Tanka* (Gualala, CA: AHA Books, 1990).
10. Larry Kimmel, “Evening Walk,” *Point Judith Light* (1996).
11. Konishi, op. cit., II, 251–258.
12. Much of what follows, in an attempted definition of tanka prose, is derived from my earlier essay, “The Elements of Tanka Prose,” *Modern English Tanka*, V2, N4 (2008), 250–262.
13. Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982), 112. Cf. “Official Definitions of Haiku and Related Terms,” adopted at the *Annual Meeting of the Society*, New York City, 18 September 2004. Available at: <http://www.hsa-haiku.org/archives/HSA_Definitions_2004.html>, last accessed May 19, 2008.
14. For an overview of modern tanka’s development in Japan, see Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era: Poetry, Drama, Criticism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 7–87. Cf. Michael

McClintock, in the introduction to *The Tanka Anthology*, edited by Michael McClintock, Jim Kacian and Pamela Miller Ness (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2003), 9–11, for a modern English-language perspective.

15. I wish here to anticipate the objection that a paragraph is elastic and offers little by way of definition since it may consist of one sentence, or two, or many more. Two remarks must be made in reply. The first observation is that while it is true that a paragraph is extremely variable, anyone who has read the prose of Proust or Joyce will know that a sentence, too, is almost infinitely variable, that it may be as simple as a monosyllabic subject and monosyllabic verb or that it may extend over a page or pages by the insertion of numerous digressions, parenthetical asides, subordinate clauses and so on. The second observation is that while one readily admits the fairness of the objection in relation to the elasticity of a paragraph of prose, it must be pointed out that the form of tanka itself, once relatively restricted to a 5-7-5-7-7 norm, is in no way fixed in current practice and shows extreme variability as well.

16. An excellent survey of the obscurity, willful or otherwise, of the aesthetic concept of *yugen* as expressed in formulations by classical waka poets, such as Shunzei, Chōmei and Shōtetsu, can be read in Robert H. Brower, *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, with an Introduction and Notes by Stephen D. Carter (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies Number 7, Center for Japanese Studies, 1992), 51–57.

17. McCullough, *op. cit.*, 15–19.

18. McCullough, *op. cit.*, 15–16.

19. Earl Miner, in *Japanese Poetic Diaries* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 9, touches briefly on the impact that the presence of tanka has upon the quality of the surrounding prose: “And yet, the effect of the poems is to heighten the sense of fiction, the air of art, the presumption of literature. When a work averages two or three poems per page, the prose *continuo* must necessarily be in some degree answerable, and so it is likely to take on a more heightened artistic quality than prose without poems.”

20. For representative examples of contemporary composite tanka and haiku sequences, consult Denis M. Garrison and Michael McClintock, Editors, *The Five-Hole Flute: Modern English Tanka in Sequences and Sets*. (Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, 2006) and Garrison and McClintock, Editors, *The Dreaming Room: Modern English Tanka in Collage and Montage Sets*. (Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, 2007).

21. See David Pollard, *The Chinese Essay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Yang Ye, *Vignettes from the Late Ming* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999), two excellent anthologies of the Chinese literary essay, for translations of Tao Qian and Su Shi.
22. See McCullough, *op. cit.*, 158–199 for excerpts from Sei Shōnagon, 379–392 for Kamo no Chōmei, 393–421 for Yoshida Kenkō. Independent translations are also available of each title cited.
23. David Landis Barnhill, *Bashō's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Bashō* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 123–125.
24. Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1984), 220–222.