

# THE LITERARY ANATOMY

## Teaching the Tanka

# Words Are My Second Language

SARAH FAY

As a teaching artist who specializes in conducting poetry workshops with autistic students in the New York City public schools, I've always been drawn to Japanese forms of poetry. With its emphasis on the presentation of clear and simple images, the haiku in particular always seemed to elicit the unique perspective of my autistic students and to be perfectly suited to the areas in which they excelled. The haiku they wrote were spare but striking, not at all sentimental, and intensely observant. Eureka, a twenty year old student in South Brooklyn, who displayed such "classic symptoms" of autism as echolalia (repeating what is said) and repetitive behaviors (she constantly tied, untied, and retied her shoes), wrote:

brown leaf  
in the tree  
jumping rope

While autism frequently means that children experience significant delays in language, self-help skills, and/or adaptive behavior, these children are often equipped with astonishingly detailed memories, a remarkable attention to detail, and the ability to think in pictures rather than language. As Temple Grandin, a professor at Colorado State University often credited for having overcome her autism, has explained: "Pictures are my first language, and words are my second language." Though autistic students are often unattuned to day-to-day matters and the nuances of certain social cues, they seek the truth in extraordinary ways. I once had a student who could barely read tell me: "Sadness is circular."

I'd been teaching the haiku to students with autism for two years when I decided to make some forays into one of the oldest Japanese forms, the tanka (TAHN-ka). Like the haiku, the tanka takes the common world as its subject and the mystery of our daily experiences as its theme. Nature is often the centerpiece of the poem. But, unlike the haiku, it employs poetic devices, such as metaphor and personification, to convey deeper thought or feeling.

In terms of structure, the tanka is always five lines long and follows a strict syllabic pattern. The classical tanka—or *uta* or *waka*, as it was called—consisted of five lines and required thirty-one *onji*. *Onji* is a term used to describe the counting of phonic characters in Japanese poetry. The standard tanka form employed five *onjis* on the first line, seven on the second, five on the third, seven on the fourth and seven on the fifth (5-7-5-7-7). Eleventh-century poet Izumi Shikibu was a master of the tanka:

Come quickly—as soon as  
these blossoms open,  
they fall.  
This world exists  
as a sheen of dew on flowers.

Her love poem is a great example of the way images can often translate our emotions more efficiently than we can explain them. When we are shown one or two vivid images in isolation from the rest of the world, more than a world is conjured.

Because English syllables are longer than Japanese syllables and carry too much information to equate to the Japanese *onji*, English-language poets often compensate by structuring their tankas in five lines with the first and third being quite short and the second, fourth, and fifth being a bit longer. The last line is used as a repetition or summary line. There are many variations, but for a poem to resemble the tanka it must be restrictive in theme and tone, and avoid sentimentality.

Before jumping into the anatomy of the tanka, I like to give the students a sense of Japan. We find it on the map, just shy of China. My students are usually very intrigued by the idea that Japan is set off by itself, alone. I tell them that Japan is a very lush and mountainous nation. It has more waterfalls than any other country. This is why so many Japanese poems are about the natural world. But it also contains multitudes. “Have any of you heard of Tokyo?” I ask my students. On one occasion a boy raised his hand and said, “Yeah, yeah, that’s in the Bronx.” After clarifying that Tokyo was not in fact in the five boroughs but is the largest city in Japan, I told the class that it’s crowded there, even more crowded than New York City. Many of the apartments are very small. Perhaps, as a result, the Japanese tend not to collect a lot junk the way Americans do. Their homes are sparse and stark. They believe in simplicity.

To begin our tanka undertaking, I hand out pictures of clouds, suns, trees, and ask students to choose one. This will be their natural object "forever" (or at least for the duration of the exercise). It will be like a pet, and they will name it as one would name a pet. To do this, they have to take into account its personality. Using any adjective, I ask them to name their natural object: thin sun, happy cloud. This serves as the first line of their poem, the mainstay.

If the class has been studying parts of speech, I review what adjectives are and how they are used in a sentence. After generating a list of descriptive words on the board, the students choose three or four that complete the picture of their natural object and write them on the second lines of their poems.

I read a few of the students' initial lines out loud. "These are great," I say, "but don't your natural objects move? Don't they do anything?" The third line should tell us if they are growing or shrinking, shaking or sliding. And, the fourth line should be like an  $x$  marking the spot. Where is your object? Is it in the sky in Africa or on the mountaintops of Afghanistan? Is it on a prairie or outside the school?

The final line is the most important, because the hook of Japanese poetry is that it often ends with a surprise. In order to do this, I ask the students to consider what they have that their natural objects will never have. Clouds don't have eyes. Trees don't have legs. The sun will never have money.

One autistic student that I worked with tended to take every direction literally. After he'd written a wonderful poem about lightning in a tree, for instance, I asked him to illustrate the poem. "Draw the lightning in the tree," I said. When I came back a few minutes later, Frederick had written "Draw lightning in the tree" on the paper. But, what he ultimately wrote was vivid and startling:

#### **Thundercloud**

thundercloud  
 black cloud  
 flashing  
 over my house  
 no eyes, no nose, no ears, no mouth

—*Frederick*

By isolating certain techniques of writing poetry, the tanka form enables autistic students to compose poems that are both lean and rich. It draws on their strengths. After all, poetry is perspective. As a teacher and writer in special education classrooms, I often feel that ultimately it is my privilege to be around students who see and conceive of the world in such a unique way.

#### **The Cloud of Shocking Thunder**

The cloud of thunder is a  
 cloud that is a black cloud  
 and if you touch it, you will get  
 shocked and the cloud is over my house  
 and the thing it is missing  
 is friends.

—*Malik*

#### **Chapter One**

Moonlight cloud,  
 white, shiny and storm,  
 rainstorm raining hard  
 is pretty because I love it.  
 The moon sleeps under the ground at night.  
 No eyes.  
 It's sad because I don't like it.

—*Daniel*