

An interview with Janick Belleau by Guy Simser for *Simply Haiku*, 'Features' section, Winter 2011, Vol. 8 N° 3

D'ÂMES et D'AILES (of souls and wings) by Janick Belleau <http://www.janickbelleau.ca/>. Trade paperback. Glossy cover artwork, seven sectional leading pages with B/W photo art, perfect bound, 5.25" x 8.5", 151 pages. ISBN 978-9810770-5-9. Les Éditions du tanka francophone, Mascouche, Quebec, Canada, 2010.

Note: Janick Belleau recently won the Canada-Japan 2010 Literary Award for this book.

GS: Your first major tanka book, if I may describe it that way, certainly has rung a tanka community bell in Canada. This Canada-Japan Literary Award offers considerable recognition in this country. Your bilingual French/English tanka poetry book reflects well on Canada's literary heritage. Congratulations.

JB: Thank you. The United States is also very excited by this Award. A recognized tanka poetess wrote me saying that she doubted such an Award would ever happen in the States.

GS: What was your intention in the creation of this book? I ask this because of your choice to do the book in two parts. First, the prose condensed history of Japanese female tanka writers and tanka links to female French tanka writers; and second, your own confessional verse. By doing so, you appear to provide an educational prose section as well as the 'heart' of your verse. This combination is not customary in the tanka writers' books I have read. Would you comment on that perception?

JB: French-speaking people love to educate, and rightly so in this case. English-speaking poets have many venues to express their views on tanka. They have many literary revues, electronic or on paper, and book editors ready to display their work. In French, we have only one literary revue which poet Patrick Simon created in Autumn 2007; the following year, Patrick founded a publishing house.

I wanted to introduce my poetry with an overview of tanka written by women from the 9th century to the 20th century because we need to know our story, as women and as poetesses. We need to read in French who those Japanese poetesses were. It is also important to know that three women authors from France have contributed to the advancement of tanka – namely Judith Gautier and Kikou Yamata as translators in the early 20th century and Jehanne Grandjean who has dedicated her life to tanka after the 2nd World War. After her, no woman in France or in French Canada has ever written a book dedicated to tanka.

One Quebecois male poet has written a full collection of tanka, André Duhaime, in 1990; male poets have been published by Mr Simon since 2008.

GS: To the book now: I wonder about the choice of the title for the first section 'Between Culture and Nature'. To me it sets up some interesting possibilities of interpretation, given the main subject of your tanka. Would you describe your considerations in the choice of this phrase?

JB: I have always been interested in culture. Being a motherless child, I took refuge in books, in CBC-FM radio, in movie theatres and in museums. It is much later, when I became a woman that I took an interest in nature – long walks in parks, public gardens and by beaches. I also discovered nature in Montreal scenery and in my travels, in many cities

around the world. It seems normal that culture goes hand in hand with nature. This is especially so as tanka allows one this combination. When one reads classical tanka, one realises that.

GS: I raised the « Between Culture and Nature » question because of my interpretation of that expression in the context of your book. Culture implies human interaction...nature does not. Sexuality in the human domain is governed by many social influences not common in 'nature'. Do you think there may have been an unconscious choice here which would allude to the book content: classic tanka theme of love and loss but from a lesbian viewpoint. Sometimes the «deep mind» inserts itself onto one's thinking. Do you choose to comment on that?

JB: Quite frankly, I have never thought of sexuality when I thought of a title for the 'Culture / Nature' section. It may have been a subconscious choice, the mind works in so many subtle ways. Tanka, classic or contemporary, often combines Nature and human nature. The feeling which is almost always evoked, in relation to Nature, is Love whether heterosexual, gay or Sapphic, whether it is between a parent and a child; whether love is fulfilled, unattainable or lost. As an incurable romantic, love guides my writing; the same person (do I need to spell out the gender?) has inspired me for the last 28 years... notwithstanding joys, pains and doubts attached to any long-term relationship.

GS: Your English tanka in this book, to my eyes, fall into the category of "traditional Japanese tanka form" written by English poets. I can only assume that they are also written in a "traditional" in your native language.

Some writers write in a mix of tanka forms/styles: the "traditional" and what one may term "modern". Some examples of what I mean by modern: writing in very short syllable counts (short enough to be haiku), writing a single run-on sentence as opposed to phrases, writing some lines well beyond the 7/5 counts, reversing the order of line to produce a 7/7 5/7/5 tanka, etc. Some writers choose to write in one or the other approaches. I attempt both with mixed success.

There has been considerable discussion about this matter of English-language tanka "form" amongst leading tanka writers, most of it around formulating a "tanka" definition. My question: did you wrestle with these options when originally writing this successful tanka book, or did you simply follow the more traditional style by choice, or do you consider it your "natural" way of writing tanka?

JB: I follow, in French and in English, the classical Japanese form by choice. I would not want to change the form of a genre that exists successfully over twelve centuries. It is enough that I depart from the established 31 Japanese sound units. I do so because Western languages do not lend themselves to this rule – in French the words are too long, in English, they are too short. Insofar as writing one sentence "folded" into five lines, I try to stay away from that pattern. I prefer to adhere to the traditional Japanese rule: to juxtapose the first three lines (5-7-5 syllables), showing a physical sensation, with the last two lines (7-7 syllables), revealing the emotion which is prompted by the sensory experience. I also try to use the third line as a pivot which will unify the two parts of the poem. The link between Nature and human feelings is therefore never-ending.

GS: The first and second sections of your tanka deal with a strong emotional struggle and this intensity carried me through one tanka after another. Did you find it difficult to push yourself to find the same intensity in the remaining sections which move beyond the confessional lyric work?

JB: Not at all. I am a very intense person. Whether I write about the countertenor Farinelli, or my lover, or my father, or poetess Ono no Komachi or Japanese Imperial Gardens or the Beyond, I will probably do so with emotional depth.

GS: There was an interesting commentary on the use of the tanka writing terms such as 'string/set/sequence' in Sanford Goldstein's article 'Not Again! Yes. Tanka Strings and Tanka Sequences' (*Atlas Poetica*, #5, Spring 2010). I enjoyed Goldstein's historical look at this naming tendency and wondered if you have seen this article. If you have, I would be interested in how you see the organization of the tanka in your book as tanka set/string/sequences, either in terms of each section, or the book as a whole. Could you comment on that?

JB: I have not read Mr. Goldstein's latest article on the subject. I think «*of souls and wings*» carries both types, «string» and «sequence»... in a loose fashion. My book contains seven sections. I see each of them as a «tanka string». Each section concentrates on a single topic, a common thread with no particular continuum: coming of age/coming out, love, family, aging, solitude, death and the Beyond. The seven parts form a whole. This sum represents a «tanka sequence» which adopts, insofar as chronology, a seasonal rhythm from Spring to Winter; some years flying faster than others. The fragments of a life come together like the pieces of a puzzle. From Birth to Death.

GS: I have heard it said that French language tanka are "different" from English language tanka. You have written this book in both languages. Do you feel there is a difference in the way poets in these two languages write their work? And a follow-up, if you do feel there are differences, how did you work in order to overcome this in your translations into English for this book?

JB: It may be so that there are differences. I wrote both the French and English versions of the tanka and had the English revised, a smooth process unencumbered by difficulties. I speak for myself: whether written in French or in English, *D'âmes et d'ailes / of souls and wings* reflects my way of saying things, of seeing the world, of feeling emotions or being aware of sensations. What matters is how one links words with feelings. The combination needs to be equally poetic and meaningful. I am a fervent admirer of Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) who believed that «the conception (heart) and the diction (words) should be like two wings of a bird».

GS: You are a tanka writer, in my opinion, with a strong personality which is reflected in your work. Do you think this is a common trait in female tanka writers who perhaps have to push harder to be heard in a crowded field? I ask this in the sense of your knowledge of female tanka writers in both English and French languages. You may wish to also consider, given the amount of research evident in your book, commenting on Japanese female tanka writers whom you have read in translations.

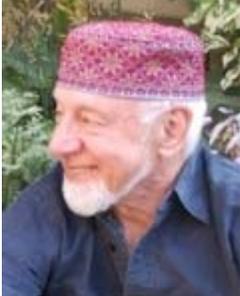
JB: To answer the first part of your question, I don't think one has to push in order to be heard. One has simply to write, to be published, to do some public relations and to hopefully arouse the interest of a well-targeted readership or media. Sometimes it works, most often it does not. The quality of the writing might help, sooner or later, whether the poet is a woman or a man. Insofar as commenting on deceased Japanese poetesses or contemporary ones

like the Empress Michiko of Japan and Tawara Machi, I'll say that I wish I could read them in their own language because translation is such an unfaithful beauty.

GS: Lastly, you have reached a very satisfactory recognition level with your first major work. Where do you go from here? What tanka work is ahead of you?

JB: I always think that my latest book is indeed my last one. I am nevertheless revising manuscripts 7 and 8 both due in 2011, one in Spring and the other in Autumn. I will continue to write feature articles on tanka for the French literary revue with the hope of having them translated for English-speaking audiences; I will continue to write tanka (and haiku, its offspring) whenever I will feel there is a tanka/haiku hidden in a sensation, in an emotion. I will probably write until I die. It is my passion.

Janick Belleau – Latest publications: *D'âmes et d'ailes / of souls and wings* - bilingual tanka (Canada-Japan Award 2010); editor of the collective work *Regards de femmes – haikus francophones* (2008). Her feature articles and presentations deal with the contribution of women insofar as the advancement of haiku and tanka in Canada, French-writing Europe and Japan. Bilingual Web site: <http://www.janickbelleau.ca/>



Tagged “imagist/humorist” by lyric poet Marianne Bluger, Guy Simser has written English & Japanese verse forms since 1978, including his five year diplomatic service in Japan. Over 60 anthologies & journals (USA, Canada, Japan, England, Australia) carry his work. Major awards: Diane Brebner Poetry Prize (Canada) & AHA Splendor Prize for Tanka Sequence (USA). Co-chair 2009 HNA Conference. Selection committee member of *GUSTS* (Canada’s first tanka journal).