

Tanka in French Canada: 1922-2013 Janick Belleau (trans. Maxianne Berger)

1922 - Journalist and poet **Jean-Aubert Loranger** (Montréal, 1896-1942) is considered Québec's first "modernist". His second collection *Poèmes* contains 31 tanka.

*Rain is falling on the roof: / My acoustic chamber is filling / With the sound of applause. /
As the day fades away, / The lamp expands and reaches me.*

1990 - **André Duhaine** (Montréal, 1948) is the original promoter of tanka in French Canada, the first to have written a complete book of tanka, *Traces d'hier* [Traces of Yesterday]. Focused on reality, not form and delicate phraseology, tanka is for him a lyrical poem of a triplet and a couplet: first a concrete situation, then an emotion.

to drink beer / and to shout more loudly / than the swollen river / hands move on / memories remain

Since then - Editor and publisher **Patrick Simon** (1953) founded the *Revue du Tanka francophone* (RTF [The French-language tanka review]) in 2007, the revival of a literary journal extinguished in 1972 after the France-based Hisayoshi Nagashima and Jehanne Grandjean's *Revue du tanka international* ceased publication. The journal is "a creative space for writing and discussing tanka." In 2008 Simon founded the *éditions du Tanka francophone* (ÉTF [the French-language tanka press]). Eighteen books have appeared so far. Simon endorses five- and seven-syllable lines and composes 31-syllable tanka.

*from bridge to island / raspberries graze the water / so extolled in song /
sensitive to your presence / like silk over your body* (taken from his anthology)

Janick Belleau (Montréal, 1946). Her collection *D'âmes et d'ailes/of souls and wings* (March, 2010) marked the first time in nearly half-century that a woman produced a complete collection of tanka in French. With an overview of "Tanka by women since the ninth century", she earned the 2010 Canada-Japan Literary Award.

*shower on leaves / carried away by the wind / I would not mind /
a never-ending season / the taste of you on my lips*

French-language tanka anthologised - In March, 2010, Patrick Simon produced the first anthology dedicated to contemporary tanka in French: *Anthologie du Tanka francophone* [Anthology of French-language tanka]. He says the French became interested in tanka during the second half of the 19th century when the Impressionists, charmed by Japanese prints, gathered in salons. This pictorial movement influenced literature. Paul Verlaine, in *Poèmes saturniens* [*Poems Under Saturn*], shaped "poems with five- and seven-syllable rhythms" depicting landscapes, impressions, states of mind. Simon's selection committee favours "poems which express the most intense emotions with musicality, lightness and reserve while respecting the tanka form". Twenty one of the 47 poets are from Canada.

*You steal a kiss / I grab your collar and hug you / so gently /
two butterflies on a branch / sway with the breeze* ~ Jessica Tremblay, Vancouver, BC

*No fear of being caught / alone in the black night / wind in my hair /
hands open and arms outstretched / I embrace the moon* ~ André Vézina, Québec City, QC

One of the ETF's flagship books appeared in December, 2011: France's **Dominique Chipot** (1958) *Le livre du Tanka francophone* [Book of French-Language Tanka]. Chipot traces the history of the poem in the French-speaking world from the 19th century to today. He organises his study into five sections. In section 3, he analyses tanka through the lenses formulated by Hisayoshi Nagashima and endorsed by Jehanne Grandjean, "form, subject and spirit." Form determines "rhythm, concision and completeness." Topic requires "simplicity, reality and precision." Spirit demands "sincerity, sensitivity and suggestiveness". Chipot delves into articles by Nagashima and Grandjean in the *Revue du tanka international* from 1953-1972, and in Grandjean's *L'Art du tanka* of 1957. Here, French tanka took root.

Tanka published extra muros - In May, 2012, **Micheline Beaudry** (Montréal, 1942) published *comme une étoile filante/like a shooting star* in Canada's two official languages.

She creates a chronology of poets who wrote about Love during Japan's classical, modern and contemporary periods and of Québec poets writing about this timeless theme. The poetics of tanka, she says, "call for sensory writing and supreme mastery of the unstated".
willow plantation / the solemn chartreuse / of dusk / I leave my body / to touch another life

More anthologies - April, 2011 saw the launch in Québec City of *J'amour* [I'llove], a collection of 65 tanka by 32 authors. The editors, Duhaime and Hélène Leclerc, say they "sought to give a contemporary view of love, the sort that young people might experience."
i saw her / the blond of my dreams / in the hallway / surrounded by / the football team ~ Mike Montreuil

*He hurries / A rose in his hand / Towards someone else /
His gaze goes through me / But doesn't see me* ~ Geneviève Rey, Québec City

In April 2012, a new press in Ottawa published *l'estuaire entre nos doutes – tankas de chez nous* [the estuary between our doubts – tanka from home]. Montrealer Maxianne Berger (1949) and Ottawan Mike Montreuil (1958) collected 45 tanka by 25 poets. They write: "[...] nearly all these tanka have fewer than 31 syllables [...] To add more would [...] risk of saying *too much*. To spotlight the brief and allusive essence of tanka, we selected poems giving a voice to the white space around them. It is up to readers to make that white space talk".
perfect circles / of the spider's web – / autumn's / blond light slides / into my childhood memories ~ Monika Thoma-Petit, Montréal

September / bursts forth in silence / so deep / your plum gaze / I will take you gently ~ Claude Drouin

In April, 2013, Berger and Montreuil produced a second anthology, *nuages d'octobre* [October clouds]. It contains 61 tanka by 39 poets. Several of the authors are new to the French-language tanka community. Nearly half of the contributors are from Europe.
on my zafu / all is illusion / outside / a woodpecker / reminds me I exist ~ Louise Vachon, Rimouski

the violet / repotted / in my hands / the weight / of a fresh start ~ Huguette Ducharme, St-Pie, QC

Tanka tomorrow - Today there are 99 published poets writing tanka in French, maybe leading to a Canadian symposium in Montréal, perhaps to define tanka outside Japan?