

# Publications of the Japan Association for Language Teaching

## Returning to Japan to talk about tanka

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Janick Belleau, poet, cultural writer, and lecturer, has been interested in *haiku* and *tanka* since 1998. (S)he revealed fond memories of her two trips to Japan: one to Tokyo in October 2007, and the other to Kyoto in May 2009. She is a relatively new voice in the field of how to write tanka and haiku poetry in English and French.

spruce forest  
around the calm lake  
this new bird  
never heard before  
your laugh on a daily basis

In Tokyo, she gave three lectures on Canadian women haiku pioneers and in Kyoto she (realised) how modern poets could walk in the footsteps of the great *Heian* poetesses. Her presentations explain how women poets have contributed to the advancement of tanka and haiku in Japan since the 9th century and in Canada and France since the 20th century. “There is nothing more I would like to do than to return to Japan to give more talks” Belleau admitted. She is on a journey to explore “the parallels between life and

the cycles of nature.”  
end of fall  
the maple defoliating  
I too—  
if I could see my mother again  
my mirror in twenty years

In 2010, Belleau authored *D'âmes et d'ailes/ of souls and wings (Onna gokoro)*, a collection of 91 tanka composed in English and French. This collection marks the first time in nearly half a century that a Francophone female poet has written a (tanka) book. In October 2010, the Canada Council for the Arts announced the book as one of the winners of the 2010 Canada–Japan Literary Awards and granted Belleau a \$10,000 prize. These awards recognize literary excellence by Canadian authors writing on Japan, Japanese themes, or themes promoting mutual understanding between Japan and Canada. The funds for these awards come from the Japan–Canada Fund endowment dedicated to literary awards. In awarding the prize to Belleau, the jury members said, “Following in the tradition of the poetesses of ancient Japan, the tanka by Janick Belleau wander through gardens and seasons, love and rebellion, echoing the age-old

sadness conjured by death and its partner, oblivion. She is a talented author, making delicate use of language to offer readers a work of quality.”

November night  
preparing a steam bath  
to forget the time –  
the house empty of echoes  
except those of the past

*D'âmes et d'ailes/ of souls and wings* begins by introducing Japanese tanka female poets. The first 42 pages of Belleau's book are given to a well-annotated and scholarly essay, in both languages, called *Tanka by women since the 9th century*. She traces the history of tanka with brief biographies of the better-known poetesses, such as Ono no Komachi and Tawara Machi.

mist on the mountain –  
Ono no Komachi  
her well of beauty:  
I feel tears flowing  
despite myself

Her study and examples are taken from books on the subject written in French. Belleau claims the first French tanka poetess was Jehanne Grandjean (1880–1982), and explains the works of Kikou Yamata and Judith Gautier, who translated Japanese tanka into French.

at sunrise  
my hair on the comb  
at nightfall  
maple leaves blown by the wind  
everything passes... except for my love

Belleau replies to sadness and death with a touch of humor. Her Japanese-influenced Canadian poetry pulls at our heart strings.  
the maidenhair tree  
at the Japanese pavilion  
loses its foliage –  
the day I lose you  
I will enter a convent

Tanka poems are written on five lines. Tanka in Japanese follow a 5–7–5–7–7 syllable form, but Belleau instructs us to write in a freestyle form. Her poem about rain is a pithier version of another prize-winning poem entitled *Rain*, composed by Dionne Brand.

rain  
drums on the attic roof  
without you beside me  
from trouble-some to dismal  
my pillow thoughts

Other notable excerpts from her prize-winning book suitable for introducing to university level English classes include:

ping pong:  
helium balloon  
over the flames -  
the laughter of two friends  
their childhood regained

a goldfinch  
shreds a bagel -  
her tuberculous father  
how he ruined his health  
on the docks

pedal boat  
on the water lily lake  
a ballet of insects  
I let myself be carried  
into their silent world

She writes about identity and the relationship we have to the environment. Here is an example of how her poetry can be a bridge between culture and nature.

heat haze  
the cry of geese  
on the quay  
I question  
my own agitation

Her love poems are open and precise. They greet the reader with wide open arms.

along the green road  
on a midsummer day  
a bay of diamonds  
wild with joy I go to you  
wearing red lipstick

Several of her poems reflect the ephemeral nature of life. She lays bare a bittersweet awareness of life's brevity. She provides catharsis.

at sunrise  
my hair on the comb  
at nightfall  
maple leaves blown by the wind  
everything passes... except for my love

the maidenhair tree  
at the Japanese pavilion  
loses its foliage –  
the day I lose you  
I will enter a convent

she removes  
a limp butterfly  
from the edge of the well –  
an urn will be more tempting  
than a coffin... when my time comes

Belleau claims that “Themes of classical tanka have changed little in thirteen centuries” and that love and death remain the universal subjects that all of us can share. The final poem in her collection reads:

at the instant of my death  
I pray to wake  
one last time  
I do not want to leave you  
without a farewell kiss, my love

## Reference

Belleau, Janick (2010). *D'âmes et d'ailes/ of souls and wings*. Quebec: Éditions du tanka francophone.