

Thirteen Tanka

for baritone, oboe, viola & cello

Karim Al-Zand
(2014)

PROGRAM NOTE:

The earliest examples of the Japanese poetic genre *tanka* (or *waka*) date from the 8th century. *Tanka* is defined structurally by the use of a specific and fixed syllable count: 31 syllables broken into lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Like the better-known (though much younger) Japanese form *haiku*, *tanka* are succinct and contemplative poems characterized by simple lyricism and poignant sentiment. They typically address themselves to the human condition (the travails of love, considerations of mortality, and so forth) usually through subtle analogy with natural phenomenon. *Thirteen Tanka* collects poems by many different authors and organizes them into four sets, each focusing on a common trope in the language of *tanka*: blossoms, bells, birds, bugs and boats.

Flowers figure prominently in *tanka* poems and have many well-known connotations in Japanese literature. The first set of poems, “blossoms,” references cherry blossoms, whose striking beauty and transience signify the impermanence of life. In contrast, chrysanthemums are associated with sorrow and grief, while plum blossoms are harbingers of spring. The second set, “bells,” includes two poems by the 10th century female poet Izumi Shikibu, verses written upon the death of her lover. The tolling of bells frequently references the passage of time, particularly in the context of lamentation. The third set combines two *tanka* about the cuckoo bird (*hototogisu*), the song of which is associated with the longing of departed spirits to return to their loved ones still living. The fourth set, “bugs,” uses a poem about the cicada, an insect seen as a symbol of reincarnation and, because of its peculiar life cycle, evanescence. The last movement, “boats,” unites four *tanka* that use the seafaring journey as a metaphor for life and love.

The versions of the poems used here are largely my own adaptations and modernizations of early English translations. Almost half are drawn from the most famous collection of *tanka*, the early 13th century *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, an anthology of one hundred poems by one hundred poets. The final poem in the first set, “Winter? Spring? Who knows?” is one of the first English language *tanka*s, written in 1916 by German-Japanese writer and critic Sadakichi Hartmann. The first poem in the last set, “To what shall I compare,” is probably the best known of all *tanka*, and presents a perfect distillation of this intimate poetic genre.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

This work may be performed as a four-movement set, under the current title *Thirteen Tanka*. Alternatively, the first three movements (Blossoms, Bells, Birds) can be performed as three short, independent works under the titles *These Days of Springtime*, *Longing and Loss*, and *That Cuckoo Who Sang* respectively. *Longing and Loss* also exists in an alternate version for soprano.

The first four movements, under the titles *These Days of Springtime*, *Longing and Loss*, *That Cuckoo Who Sang* and *Cicada* were commissioned by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra for their annual “Musical and Literary Offrenda” performances in conjunction with *Dia de los Muertos*. They were premiered by Karol Bennett (soprano, *Longing and Loss*), Timothy Jones (baritone, *These Days of Springtime*, *That Cuckoo Who Sang* and *Cicada*) with Alecia Lawyer (oboe), Suzanne LeFevre (viola) and Shino Hayashi/Julia Sengupta (cello) respectively on October 29, 2013, October 30, 2012, October 25, 2011 and October 29, 2014 at the Lawndale Arts Center, Houston, Texas. An early version of the complete set was premiered on February 6, 2013 by Marcus DeLoach (baritone), Robert Atherholt (oboe), Ivo-Jan van der Werff (viola) and Matthew Kufchak (cello).

 November 2014

DURATION:

I. Blossoms	1' 45"
II. Bells	2' 30"
III. Birds	2' 00"
IV. Bugs	1' 00"
V. Boats	2' 00"

TOTAL: ca. 9' 15"

Thirteen Tanka

I. BLOSSOMS

1. If I came to pick
The white chrysanthemum blooms,
I would be puzzled—
Which are colored, which are white?—
By the morning frost today.

2. In the peaceful light
Of the steady, shining sun
These days of spring time,
Why do the cherry's soft blooms
Scatter themselves restlessly?

3. Winter? Spring? Who knows?
White buds from the plum tree wing
and mingle with the snow.
No blue skies these flowers bring,
Yet their fragrance augurs spring.

II. BELLS

4. I hear the bells toll
Their evening signal to me:
It is time for bed;
But I cannot fall asleep
For I am thinking of you.

5. Listen, listen:
Longing and loss.
In the sound of the bells
There is not an instant,
No moment in which to forget.

6. In love longing
I listen to the monk's bell.
I will never forget you
Even for an interval
Short as those between the bell notes.

III. BIRDS

7. That cuckoo who sang
on and on last summer—
is it he now,
or another,
calling in a voice unchanged?

8. The cuckoo
repeating his cry,
now right here singing—
how clear and cool
the color of his voice!

IV. BUGS

9. Cicada voices
rising continually;
far away,
me beneath an oak
I cannot see the top of.

V. BOATS

10. To what shall I compare
Our life in this world—
It is like a boat
Rowing out at break of day
Leaving no trace behind.

11. Over the wide, wide sea,
Towards its many distant isles
I set off rowing.
Will the fishing boats thronged here
Proclaim my journey to the world?

12. Over the wide, wide sea,
As I row and look around,
It appears to me
That the white waves, far away,
Are the ever shining sky.

13. Like a mariner
Sailing through the stormy winds
With his rudder gone;
Where, in the depth of our love,
The end lies, I do not know.

Tanka 1, 2, 9 and 11–13 are drawn from the early 13th century poetry collection *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, compiled by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241). They are my own adaptations and modernizations of two early English translations: William N. Porter, *A Hundred Verses from Old Japan* (1909) & Clay MacCauley, *Hyakunin-Isshu (Single Songs of a Hundred Poets)* (1917). Tanka 3 is one of the first English language Tankas, written by German-Japanese writer and critic Sadakichi Hartmann, and contained in his book *Tanka and Haikai: Japanese Rhythms* (1916). Tanka 5 & 6 are by the 10th century poet Izumi Shikibu. No. 7 is an anonymous Tanka from the *Kokinshu* (905). No. 8 is by Kyogoku Tamekane (1254–1332). Tanka 4 (by Lady Kasa, [Kasa no Iratsume]) and 10 (by Sami Mansei) are from the *Man'yōshū*, the oldest extant collection of Japanese poetry (8th century).

Thirteen Tanka

Karim Al-Zand (2014)

I. Blossoms

1. If I came to pick
The white chrysanthemum blooms,
I would be puzzled—
Which are colored, which are white?—
By the morning frost today:

2. In the peaceful light
Of the steady; shining sun
These days of spring time,
Why do the cherry's soft blooms
Scatter themselves restlessly?

3. Winter? Spring? Who knows?
White buds from the plum tree wing
And mingle with the snow.
No blue skies these flowers bring,
Yet their fragrance augurs spring.

Moderately; buoyant, lilting ♩. = 63

Baritone

Oboe *mp* *mf*

Viola *mp* *mf*

Cello *mp* *mf*

7 *mp cheerful*

If I came to

f *mp* *arco* *tr*

pizz. secco *f* *mp*

12 *poco f nonplussed*

pick the chry - san - the - mum blos - som - I would be puzzled—

mf *mf* *mf*

16

Which are col-ored, which are white?— by the morn-ing frost

pizz. *arco*

21

— to — — — day.

f *p*

27

p serene *mf*

In the peace-ful light of the stead-y shin-ing sun these

cresc. *cresc.* *cresc.*

32

heartfelt *f*

days — — — of spring-time, — why do the cher-ry's soft blooms scat-ter them-selves so

f *f* *f*

36 *molto rit.* ----- *a tempo*

p *mp*

rest-less-ly? Win-ter? Spring? Who knows? White buds from the plum tree

41 *mf*

wing and min-gle with the snow. No blue skies,

mf *mf* *pizz.*

arco

47 *mp*

no blue skies these flow-ers bring yet...

decresc. *mp* *p*

arco

53 *p*

their fra-grance au-gurs spring.

p *tr*

II. Bells

4. I hear the bell toll
 Its evening signal to me:
 It is time for bed;
 But I cannot fall asleep
 For I am thinking of you.

5. Listen, listen:
 Longing and loss.
 In the sound of the bell
 There is not an instant,
 No moment in which to forget.

6. In love longing
 I listen to the monk's bell.
 I will never forget you,
 Even for an interval
 Short as those between the bell notes.

Slowly; hypnotic $\text{♩} = 54$

Baritone: *p* I hear the bell toll

Oboe: *p*

Viola: *p* port.

Cello: *p* *fp* *sim.*

④

Baritone: its eve - ning sig - nal to me: It is time for bed;

⑦

ad libitum, recit.

Baritone: *mf* but I can-not fall a-sleep for I am think-ing of you Listen: *suddenly anxious*

Oboe: *quickly* *mp* *mf*

Viola: *quickly* *mp* *mf*

subito
Very Quickly; rousing ♩ = 138

9

f Lis-ten, long-ing and loss.

ringing *f* *ringing* *f* *ringing* *f* *ringing* *f*

13

ff suddenly placid (♩ = 69)
p In the sound of the bell there is not an

ff *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p*

17

in - stant, no mo-ment in which to for - get.

22

mp sempre In love long-ing

timbral *tr* *pp* *sim.* *tr*

on 2 strings *fp resonant pizz.* *pp* *sim.*

poco f *sim.*

25

I lis - ten to the monk's bell. I will nev - er for - get.

28

you, e - ven for an in - ter - val short as those be -

31

tween the bell notes.

III. Birds

7. That cuckoo who sang
on and on last summer—
is it he now,
or another,
calling in a voice unchanged?

from the Kokinshu (905)

8. The cuckoo
repeating his cry;
now right here singing—
how clear and cool
the color of his voice!

Kyogoku Tamekane (1254 1332)

Fairly Quickly; bemused ♩ = ca. 80

Baritone *mf* That cuckoo who sang on and

Oboe *mf scherzando, insistent* *mp*

Viola *mf scherzando, insistent* *mp*

Cello *mf scherzando, insistent* *mp*

⑥ *poco cresc.* (subito) slightly slower *p espres.*

on, on and on and on and on, and on and on and on and on last summer— is it

p

⑪ a tempo *mf* slightly slower again a tempo *poco f*

he now, (and on and on and on and on and on) or another— (and

mp *p* *p*

①6 *slightly slower again*
p *mp*

on and on and on and on and on and on) cal - ling_ in a voice un - changed? The

②1

cuck-oo, re-peat-ing his cry, now right here sing-ing_

tempo primo *ten. ritenuto*

②7

how clear and cool the col-or of his voice!

IV. Bugs

9. Cicada voices
rising continually;
far away;
me beneath an oak
I cannot see the top of.

Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241)

Quickly; insistent, excited ♩ = 132

Baritone *mf* (♩) buoyant
Ci - ca - - - da, Ci -

Oboe *mf* (♩) buoyant

Viola *p* *sordino, quiet buzzing*

Cello *p* *sul pont. electric humming* *mf* *p* *mf*

⑤ *cresc.*
ca - - - da, Ci - ca - da voi - ces ris - - - ing, ris - - - ing, *cresc.*

⑨ *f* *decresc.*
con - tin - ual - ly ris - - - ing: *ord.* *f* *decresc.*

13

mp far a - way, _____

p *mp*

p *mf* ³ *poco f* *mf* ³

ord. *t^b* sul pont. ord. *t^b* sim. *t^b*

17

me, be - neath an oak I can - not see the top of.

f *f* *molto f*

t^b *t^b* *t^b*

V. Boats

10. To what shall I compare
Our life in this world—
It is like a boat
Rowing out at break of day
Leaving no trace behind.

12. Over the wide, wide sea,
As I row and look around,
It appears to me
That the white waves, far away;
Are the ever shining sky.

11. Over the wide, wide sea,
Towards its many distant isles
I set off rowing:
Will the fishing boats thronged here
Proclaim my journey to the world?

13. Like a mariner
Sailing through the stormy winds
With his rudder gone;
Where, in the depth of our love,
The end lies, I do not know.

Very Quickly; vibrant ♩ = 144
2+2+3 *f*

Baritone: To what shall I compare our life_ in this world—

Oboe: *f* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *ff*

Viola: *f* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *ff*

Cello: *f* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *fp*—*ff* *ff*

⑦ quietly pulsating (same tempo)

Baritone: It is like_ a boat_____

Clarinet: *p*

Bassoon: *p*

Cello: *p* *sim.*

⑬

Baritone: row-ing out at break of day leav-ing no trace be-hind_____

Clarinet: *p*

Bassoon: *p*

Cello: *p*

19

O - ver the wide, wide sea, _____ to -

25

wards its man - y dis - tant isles _____

31

I set off row - ing. Will the fish - ing boats thronged _____

36

here pro - claim my jour - ney to the world? _____ O - ver the

41

wide, wide sea, _____ as I row and look a-round, it ap -

mf

mf

mf

46

pears to me that the white waves, far a-way, are the e-ver shin-ing sky. _____

poco f

poco f

poco f

51

Like a mar-i-ner _____

mp

mp

mp

57

sail-ing through the storm-y winds _____ with his rud-der gone; _____

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

62

f

Where in the depths of our love, the end lies,

fp-ff *fp-ff* *fp-ff* *fp*

fp-ff *fp-ff* *fp-ff* *fp*

fp-ff *fp-ff* *fp-ff* *fp*

69

p

I do not know.

ff *p* *ff* *p* *pizz.* *p*

74

arco