



marianne bluger

gusts



gusts



Pamela Claughton, *Solstitial*, n.d., etching on paper (10.5 x 12.5 in.).

gusts

Selected Tanka

MARIANNE BLUGER

Marianne Bluger

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The Thumbless Man

On Nights Like This

Gathering Wild

Summer Grass

Tamarack & Clearcut

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Larry

or Sanford Goldstein

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PREFACE

For more than 1,200 years the most popular form of poetry in Japan has been the *tanka*. The traditional *tanka* has 31 syllables with seventeen in the first segment (sometimes divided into three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables) and fourteen in the second (often of 7 syllables each). These technical niceties are not always strictly observed, nor do they impart the essence of the form, which is that of a brief, lucid lyric. About 300 years ago Basho began to shape the first segment of the classical *tanka* into a new figure and called his delightful improvisation *haiku*.

A good *tanka* captures the intensity of one emotionally charged moment and almost always includes a vivid image grounding it in a specific locale. This rootedness is so powerfully expressed by the great *tanka* masters as to

affect the very body of the reader, at least this reader; and the attendant sense of organic harmony with creation is one hallmark of the finest work in tanka. No doubt this peculiar but marvellous aesthetic stems from the Shinto tradition, which hallows the spirit of natural places and never deals in abstractions.

A well-wrought and deeply-felt tanka can be almost like a prayer in the emotional abandon with which it seems to spring from some deep, pure faith in the wholeness and goodness of creation, however anguished the particular moment. And I sometimes feel that even the spirit of Zen acceptance which has come to overlay the later tanka literature is only another variation on the mystical understanding of one who sees, as Julian of Norwich did in her thirteenth revelation, that "All will be well, all manner of things will be well."

To write a tanka seems an act of faith; but,

then, perhaps the writing of all poetry is....

In any case, I suspect that in perhaps twenty years, as they continue their first tentative experiments with tanka, North American poets will produce excellent collections to chronicle life on this or other planets as we spin into brave new worlds. It would be hard to imagine a more apt or potent form: tanka can be as concentrated as a head-line, stunning as a full-face shot, deft as a shadow, wild as a scream, or salty and hot as a silent, spilling tear. Though slight, they need never be trivial.

Conveying what tanka poems can do is very difficult; however, *Gusts* is just the record of what, during a three-year obsession, tanka have done with me.

willow

Ba-ba-boom
ba-ba-boom
still pounding
this heart that once failed me
in wayward youth

Gusts
bend the trees tonight
at each new onslaught
to endure
or not ...

Tinkling
in the night storm
wind chimes
from my friend
so long estranged

In the middle
of Thanksgiving dinner
a man at the door
wanting his mother
(who lived here before)

The cosmetician
twisting a new
lipstick reveals
on her pale inner arm
a bruise bloom

Dark now
by six
& my children
in distant cities
with lives of their own ...

Smoke this morning
from the chimney of that woman
I spoke with
once
last spring ...

Frost
that chill of the past
whitening every breath —
& a bead of blood
as I prune the canes

In mid-winter
oppressed by irrelevant
rhythms —
the dishwasher cycles
a dryer button clicks

In my dressing gown
sulking at the window
I watch
parents deliver
their infants to daycare

Daughter

je me souviens — on a day like this
in bitter winter Montréal
hugging your infant body
to keep us both from cold

Like a stranger
she has rung the bell —
my own mother
in the bright sun frail
her soft cheeks wrinkled

Here goes
violent spring blasting
a rigid woman
eyes tight shut — arms stiff by her sides
from winter's black cannon

In harsh winds
by the high-school exit
shivering
girls
share a cigarette

I dreamed
I had grown a penis
a limp pink worm
for which I felt surging
a mortified affection

What to make
of the neighbour's cat
crouched under my feeder
or of the neighbour
shrugging "It's nature"?

Past midnight
the sound of someone
running through the yard
now in daylight
prints of a woman's pumps ...

Just sitting
in the stained-glass gloom
of an empty church
where I knelt as a child — was married
From here I'll be buried ...

I see an old willow
limbs bent
to the earth
& feel weary
with my self

All day
the mandala of shade
has been moving
round the maple ...
still I don't know what to do

A water strider ...
in this old canoe I glide
on a summer pond
among the reeds
afloat on clouds

Just one
bronze chrysanthemum ...
o the plants of this world
signal mercy
where love has failed

east

No one living
by these basalt cliffs
to hear the surf
or watch
snowflakes plunge to black waves

The sun gone
down past Blomidon* —
in the after-chill
his hand
finds mine

* Nova Scotia promontory

At the darkening
end of afternoon — the sky
moving fast
the clouds
rushing away ...

All day
birding Grand Manan
with his lovelorn friend
in the sun and wind
we refrain from embracing

The apples are in
& the pines Pa planted
the year he took ill
sighing in the wind
have grown tall

Chewing an oyster
in a fogbound inn
too late
I feel my teeth
grind pearl to grit

The air cools
and a blue-black bruise
creeps
across the hills — darkness
taking the trees

Still Evangeline's
these misty lowlands
where a clamdigger bends
alone
in the chill of dawn

Under the moon
by the seawall for miles
I follow
dunegrass shadows marching
nowhere on the sand

A drowning off Digby
& children wail
round the kitchen table
where he'll never lay
his pipe and penknife down at night again

Just like today
sun glinted
on these spray-washed rocks
& sea-gulls cried
the day those miners died

On these cold waves
no trace of the wake that was
the Viking's screed —
& on my mind Keats
who knew he had written on water

In the gloaming
watching cows file
back to a barn —
again: "To buy
or not to buy a farm"

On hay in the loft
I laze
warmed
by a sun-shaft
charged with golden dust

& we pull away
from Ma Neily left
alone on the farm
weeping & smiling
her plucky smile

the glowing
and the glowing
back to the
and the glowing
and the glowing

the glowing
and the glowing
back to the
and the glowing
and the glowing

the glowing
and the glowing
back to the
and the glowing
and the glowing

the glowing
and the glowing
back to the
and the glowing
and the glowing

sweet-grass

In the cold shade
of office towers
a bus-stop stranger
with the eyes
of a man who knows

The morning after
the referendum — rain
pounding Westmount
Was it victory?
Was it defeat?

I saw
in a lightning flash
mapping
that hot green sky
Ottawa vanish

A thin man
hanging onto his hat
running —
his coattails flying —
disappears down the subway

Bodhidharma!
a red-eyed wino
slouched in the sun
on the Bank Street Bridge
watching everyone

Turning & turning
spot-lit on black velvet
for sale
in the airport hotel
a carved narwhal

Downtown a bald man
his dome glistening
puts on sunglasses
& a girl on rollerblades
hair streaming behind
swings into the wind

In robes I've starched
the way he likes them — stiff
he meditates
severely uncreased
an exotic isosceles peak

"Remain
what you are" says the foreign master
speaking
(of course)
in his native language

Tipped off
by the catch in her voice
I look up
to an Arirang* speck —
his back!

*Korean lamentation on parting

Sunbathing

I was reading — history
on the beach in my bikini
when a gust
flipped several ages ...

That mockingbird
broadcasting
where its nest is not —
like him in his speeches
now he's famous

Well I know now
it was wrong — that turn I took
that got me here stuck
on a backroad at nightfall
to my axles in mud

Unbending
numb legs years later
I wobble
drunk with freedom
down a sidestreet of spring

Up a tree
in the seminary garden
a novice gone berserk
beating his breast
keeps shouting *I'm an ape*

Augusta
that spy
who dressed well and never
gave anything away
cracked up today

On the night train
through that foreign land
I waver once
glimpsing
a lit farm kitchen

At last
I arrive at the iron gate
— locked
& the stone lion
with snow on its back

At take-off
the metal wing
motionless
and my hometown reeling
far below

One desolate night
I hurl his bitter note
right into the boxstove
it curls
& a rim of gold takes every word

On my pitchfork
a clump with compost worms
wrenched
from dark securities
writhing in the light

Just visiting
my friend in the asylum
I too start to see
each happy face
as a fascist device

Older
than all the shut-ins
the stooped Commander
visiting his veterans
on a cloudy afternoon

The furnace starts
& a dust bole
shifts
today in the fiftieth
year of my life

You laugh & I see
the shadow of the hawk of fear
cross your cheek
Is he leaving
your shoulder for good?

The last passenger
has gone
alone in *Arrivals*
I take out my compact
freshen my lipstick ...

An old Cree
in his souvenir shop
burning sweet-grass
it's giving up —
such fragrant smoke

the old time
to his country
leaving every
it's going up
and every one

the old time
the year
the old time
the old time
the old time

white moon road

At 3 a.m.

a stranger in this Yankee town

I stop by a lit-up showroom

where new Fords rotate

all night long

Feverish

in a hotel room

I watch her climb

breast to the night clouds

— that travelling moon

In Harlem heat
unable to sleep
listening to brontosaurus
cockroaches rattle
the cornflakes box

A glorious sunset
by Cape Canaveral
rocket totems
I try to understand
the U.S.A.

Lighting
one last cigarette
and shifting his weight
the private admits he might
have heard human cries

On Cape Cod
in a midnight supermarket
I spot the Virgin
a teen — serenely pregnant
pushing a mop pail with her foot

Again he takes my hand
and I let him
lead me along
a path that might
vanish on wind-stroked prairie

In a motel mirror
my puffy lined face
Who am I?
What am I?
Which town is this?

Night falls
& the Nam vet
with his camera
prowls the campground
snapping rabbits

In a dusty field
far from home
he reminds me
meadowlarks here
sing a different tune

Cajun rhythms
thumping up through our feet
in Lafayette
sipping bourbon we eat
shrimp till our greased chins shine

Shall we
stroll down that sycamore aisle
to the sky-filled pond
— all that's left —
the mansion burned

Wind
across these Pawnee plains
where a homestead stands
roofless
under low-slung cloud

The first night
driving home to Canada
a white moon
like a sign
above the turnpike ...

the burial

Several languages
and a thousand theorems
safe in his cranium
how serene my father
looks in death

Also falling on granite
already mapped with lichen
raindrops
blotching the surface
obscure my useless tears

It fades
— the *amen* of the last hymn
we sing for him
now a thin cortège
wends west under lowering cloud

In the rain
by the gravepit
a gust
snaps the widow's scarf
the priest's black skirt ...

By the shed
among smoky mauve asters
I set a flat rock
upright
not to forget ...

February
consolation
the subtle hues
of each bare twig
in his abandoned garden

invisible zero

(In '67
a young McGill philosopher
over beef & Bordeaux
hears A.J. Ayer
boast that Yevtushenko is his friend)

Almost invisible
the zero
I traced
only last week
in the mantle dust ...

Some days
just a lip-twitching
ventriloquist
trying to make
a plastic dummy speak

— or a busker
on a sunny Seventeenth
for bits of flung silver
playing to both
R.C. and Protestant boys

— or a lunatic
in the window of a burning tower
tweezing stamps
enraptured
with philatelic coasts

One big sweep
and the hook
sends my straw hat
spinning
off down the river

In purple night
glistening
on its optic stem
a single bloodshot eyeball
continues to rotate

As I stitch
this white quilt
small pricks result
in delicate
florets of red

It's twilight
& the pagoda in the botanical garden
a silhouette now
appears to become
an eternal symbol

I seem to be emerging
from the cold blue shadow
of a boulder
lodged at a quite dangerous
angle of repose

Friday night
in the rooming house
late
a lonesome Nigerian
playing his flute

Through my binoculars
towards dusk —
on a combine rusting
in fields of grass
a falcon rests

In the pre-dawn chill
Compulsion growls
— loyal beast
I've been tending
at first light for years

The old moon
its hard light
& in naked branches
an occasional gust
as the hierarchies shift

The footprints on sand
have come to an end
(did he swim?
was he drowned?)
in the Ocean of Forgetting

That racket?
my Siamese
crossing the keyboard
with random plinks
to her patch of sun

The poet Marco
at the summer solstice barbecue
noticing
the T-bones
shaped like Africa

With the conference
winding up
by the coffeemaker
hang-over pale
we lonesome poets linger

It's worn a bit
but I like to write
in this tattered
old silk-bound
book from Japan

At dawn as the mist
clears in Clyde Woods
a lyric forms
every word
Ontario made

Alone on a gusty beach
I let the taut string go
freed at last
my home-made kite
soars out of view

Strapless
under the lobby chandelier
— caught
in a blast
from the revolving door

& over there
across the valley
that little bonfire
with the smokesmear above
is my hometown

...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

the marriage cryptic

It's a transplant
love
feel this new heart
beat gently here
inside my blouse

Also watching
your plane take off —
in dry grass
where the runway ends
a fox

Headed back
from good-byes at the airport
I keep checking
in rearview the sky
where your contrail lingers

Maybe because you've gone
he has come
to thread my ankles
as I weed the garden
— the neighbour's tom

The phone rings
It's you & listening
I see
out the window bare branches
have let the sky through

All night
rain
& on the bridge
an endless chain
of tail-lights disappearing

Leaves rustle —
the last few migrants
passing through
this park among concrete
slabs of purblind city

All this long
September Sunday afternoon
only the blows
of a neighbour hammering
the house he plans to sell

Behind the drapes
I watch a stranger ring
& wait ...
watch him turn now and walk
back into windy night

Burning
through this long grim night
of torment flashbacks
from the bad years
one blue star

Labour Day past
we stop for a chat
with Gilly from Carp
out by his truck at the roadside
selling wild honey

In a ruined orchard
among drenched leaves
I found you these
mist-silvered
fat blue plums

Insomniac

I prowl the house
with the moon showing up
worn linoleum battered appliances
plates we dumped in the sink

Blackbird

back on his snag
in the still-frozen swamp
gamely flashes
a red epaulette

April Fools
at the crossroads one day
on his Harley
we blast
right through the red

His forehead
furled when I missed a pill
smooth now as gently
he changes
my bandage

In my whole life
the persons I've known
who were gentle
have numbered
only two

A hazy moon
that frozen night
numb
I pushed on vowing
never to go home

Unable
to cope with the man
I eat
four fillets of pickled herring
and a bar of marzipan

First snow
light
in every room
& the perfume
of our potted orange in bloom

Moon sheen
on this checkered floor —
I dream
you are bishop darling
in a chessgame

Black twigs
through rain-bleared glass
after a while
in focus
appear to be knobbed with buds

In morning sun
the magnolia buds
I've checked every day
sparkle
— cased in ice

Bronzed
the shirtless Florida
bill-board man
beaming down
on this snow-clogged town

Darkness deepens
in the cedar woods
an owl calls
another
answers

Warblers
flit through the aspens
a man asks, "Remember
Seal Island that autumn?"
the woman answers, "Yes"

In moonlight ghostly
by a long tradition
we lie together
not yet pried apart
by death's velvet gloves

By the cedar
a mock-orange in bloom
& between
the magnolia & lilac
our back-door wide open

In a sort of May fit
he dug the asphalt up
& planted roses
so now we have summer
perfume through the screen

A bittern calling
as we trek the line
through a moonlit fen
breathing in the night-
blooming viburnum

Still owling
in shirtsleeves under the moon
& listening together
for Barreds*
after all these years

*species of owl

You left
the door slightly
open
& sun
came slanting in

Mad I stalk off
down the road in teeming rain
& run out of steam
by a brook where plashing
cows seem quite content

Backing out
he starts rolling
the window down fast
& with no glass between
blows a kiss

Remember that
soft frangipani night
afloat
in warm shallows as surf
rocked our locked hips

Husband
descends from painting
the bedroom ceiling
a little tuft
of white in his black hair

We're in the dark
when a crescent moon
sails from billowing cumulus
He clears his throat
I wait

Bright asterisks —
the stars
do make me think
you're not half bad: here darling
have a drink

The river
at the tips of our sandals
as we argue
keeps shifting
little pebbles

From a dream of lostness
I wake to mist ...
the lake has vanished
from the depths
a loon laughs

Just us again
in swampy bush
with the old map torn at every crease
and blackflies biting
in the fading light

At high noon
a hawk above us
rocking on a thermal
as we hike in circles
trying to work things out

Days now
of leaden skies
& of trying
to but not
getting any closer

We are only details
in a landscape with figures
— or maybe
ten frames
in a matinée film

Resting our oars
we drift
deep
in the mysterious
forest of married silence

Among potted palms
an end-of-August afternoon
declining
in warm amber
rum

Fleeing city lights
we find a place
where darkness is
throbbing
with peepers and stars

Like a guernsey
in her summer cloud
of flies
I flick an ear
a tail at him sometimes

In the heat
my green silk dress
a heap on the mat
& on your nape
the taste of salt

As we hike a trail
through summer birch
all at once
a withered patch
with goldenrod and asters

Chores done
we linger by the barn
find Orion
& me almost drunk
with some kind of idiot hope

Intimate
in the heat of night
the radio's
deep-throat sliding
jazz trombone

One day
as we rest among shadowed ferns
a grouse
lifting each slow foot
moves close

— later a cuckoo
calls through the woods
& a breeze
stirs an ancient bough
letting sun stream through

Could you
call it a lyric
this poem of a long-married couple
doing the cryptic together
in thin winter light?



Larry Neily, *Marianne Bluger*, 1998, b & w
photo, detail (4 x 6 in.).

BLUGER'S POEMS ARE ELEGANT AND SPARE. They are also pure, powerful and uncompromisingly modern. Although Japanese poets have been writing *tanka* for more than a millennium, *Gusts* is the first book-length collection of *tanka* published in Canada.

Marianne Bluger is an award-winning poet with many books to her credit. Since the late sixties, when she was married to a Zen master, she has been experimenting with Japanese forms. Her most recent work, *Tamarack & Clearcut*, is a significant and beautiful collection of *haiku*.

Professor Sanford Goldstein, a gifted *tanka* poet in his own right, founding editor of *Five Lines Down*, the influential American *tanka* magazine, and translator of *Tangled Hair* (Akiko), *Red Lights* (Mokichi), and several other classics of modern Japanese literature, has been a mentor and sometime editor in the compilation of this book. To read Bluger's *tanka* is to experience a

fresh aesthetic and to feel the quickening of one's own heart. Each fleeting moment is captured with passion, precision and eloquence.

As Judith Fitzgerald has written of Bluger's earlier lyric work, "whether she examines natural phenomena or illuminates human nature, it is abundantly clear that a powerful sensibility is at work in these poems." About her poetry, Louis Dudek has said, "I'm absolutely floored, delighted and enthralled. The quality is so good throughout ... the language so fine."

MARIANNE BLUGER resides in Ottawa, where she is regular contributor to the lively arts community.

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