



On Craft: Harryette Mullen on Starting a Tanka Diary

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My tanka diary began with a desire to strengthen a sensible habit by linking it to a pleasurable activity. I wanted to incorporate into my life a daily practice of walking and writing poetry. As committed as I am to writing, I needed a break in my routine, so I determined to alter my sedentary, unconsciously cramped posture as a writer habitually working indoors despite living here in “sunny California.” With a pen and notebook tucked into my pocket, I could escape from the writer’s self-imposed confinement, if only to walk from home to the local post office. With the tanka diary to focus my attention, a pedestrian stroll might result in a poem. Merging my wish to write poetry every day with a willingness to step outdoors, my hope was that each exercise would support the other.

Now I look forward to this daily reminder that head and body are connected. Most days I go for short walks in various parts of Los Angeles, Venice, and Santa Monica, or longer hikes in the canyons on weekends with friends. I also lead student poets on “tanka walks” in the Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Garden on the campus of UCLA. At other times I explore unfamiliar neighborhoods as I travel. Trips to the botanical garden are opportunities for learning the names of plants from all over the world that have found a home here in California, a place defined as much by non-native as by its native species.

Like many inhabitants of Los Angeles, I am not native to this state of elemental seasons: wind, fire, flood, mudslide, and earthquake. Like ice plant, eucalyptus, and nearly all of LA’s iconic palm trees, I too am a transplant to this metropolis of motor vehicles with drivers who regard, and are regarded by, pedestrians and cyclists as road hazards. Walking instead of driving allows a different kind of attention to surroundings. Each outing, however brief, becomes an occasion for reflection. Los Angeles, however urban, offers everyday encounters with nature.

So I began the diary despite being able to recognize only the most common creatures, and feeling that I lack a proper lexicon to write about the natural world, when what we call natural or native is more than ever open to question. I did not turn into an amateur naturalist or avid birdwatcher, but I became a bit more aware of my environs. The 366 tanka verses collected here represent a year and a day of walking and writing.

This is a record of meditations and migrations across the diverse terrain of southern California’s urban, suburban, and rural communities, its mountains, deserts, ocean, and beaches. In greater Los Angeles my walks can range from downtown streets and alleys to spectacular natural landscapes to outdoor shopping malls. Also noted are differences of climate and geography as I travel to other states. Parts of the tanka diary were written during a month-long residency in Marfa, Texas,

sponsored by the Lannan Foundation. Others were written during a visit to Sweden where I was invited to participate in Världspoensdagen, Stockholm's celebration of World Poetry Day.

This work is my adaptation of a traditional form of Japanese syllabic verse. A tanka is a brief poem of thirty-one syllables, originally printed as a single line of text. The line is subject to internal division of semantic and syllabic units. When written in English it is customary to break the tanka into five lines, approximating its fixed pattern of syllables (5-7-5-7-7). My limited knowledge of the form is based on reading translations of a few classical and modern Japanese poets, along with contemporary tanka composed in English.

While embracing the notational spirit of this tradition, I depart from established convention in both languages, choosing instead a flexible three-line form with a variable number of syllables per line. I try to adhere to the thirty-one-syllable limit, although I am aware that the number of syllables in a given word can vary, depending on the speaker and the circumstances. "California," for example, sometimes has four syllables, at other times, five.

The brevity and clarity of tanka make it suitable for capturing in concise form the ephemera of everyday life. With refined awareness of seasonal changes and a classical repertoire of fleeting impressions, Japanese traditional poetry contemplates, among other things, the human being's place in the natural world, an idea I wanted to explore in my own nontraditional way.

What is natural about being human? What to make of a city-dweller taking a "nature walk" in a public park while listening to a podcast with ear-bud headphones? What of a poet who does not know the proper names of native and non-native fauna and flora, who sees "a yellow flower by the creek"—not a *Mimulus*?

Harryette Mullen's newest collection is *Urban Tumbleweed*. Mullen is also the author of seven previous books of poetry, including *Recyclopedia* and *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, a finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She has recently received the Academy of American Poets Fellowship and the Jackson Poetry Prize from Poets & Writers. She is Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.