

Beyond Five End-Stopped Lines by Ryland Shengzhi Li

The great majority of published tanka have five, end-stopped lines. This style of lineation derives not from Japanese tradition, but from English translations of Japanese tanka. It produces a visually distinct form and supports other hallmarks of tanka poetry, including direct expression and dreaming room. Despite these benefits, tanka poets ought not to feel bound to the conventional format, but rather tailor form to what each poem means. Experimentation with line—one of the most powerful tools in poetry and a central distinguishing feature from prose—promises to deepen tanka’s capacity as a vehicle for poetic expression.

CONVENTIONAL LINEATION

The prevalence of the five end-stopped lines in tanka is unquestionable. This format constitutes the vast majority of tanka found in any tanka journal and in contest winners. It is also attested to by formal definitions of tanka, including Denis Garrison’s pithy statement that tanka is “five phrases in five lines.”¹

The conventional lineation has two aspects: five lines and end-stopping. Of these, the use of five lines is practically universal. It is difficult to even find published tanka—at least when considering tanka originally written in English—with a different number of lines.

By contrast, the use of end-stopping is merely prevalent. Jenny Ward Angyal, in describing what she is looking for as tanka editor for *Under the Basho*, summarizes the prevalent view: “Each line is ideally comprised of a single, coherent poetic phrase. Enjambment is used rarely and then only to create a carefully considered effect.”² Similarly, Jeanne Emrich, in her “A Tanka Repair Kit,” discourages the use of “awkward enjambment,” suggesting that poets should generally “end a line on a strong verb or noun, not on an article or conjunction.”³ However, ending the line on a “strong verb or noun” does not, generally speaking, result in a better enjambment; it results in end-stopping.

¹ Denis Garrison, “Defining Tanka,” in *Tanka Teachers Guide* (2007); see also Amelia Fielden, Denis Garrison, & Robert D. Wilson, “A Definition of the Ideal Form of Traditional Tanka Written in English,” *Simply Haiku* (2009).

² Jenny Ward Angyal, “Tanka,” *Under the Basho* (visited May 25, 2022).

³ Jeanne Emrich, “A Tanka Repair Kit,” in *Tanka Teachers Guide* (2007).

Despite its rarity, enjambment's legitimacy as tanka technique has long been acknowledged, including in Michael McClintock's introduction to the seminal *The Tanka Anthology*, where he quotes Geraldine Clinton Little's poem:

**ah, summer, summer,
how quickly you fade. I cut
 rusted zinnias,
place them on a glassed tabletop,
 as if time could double.**

According to McClintock, the enjambment, which follows "cut" on line 2, creates "momentum" for the poem. Together with the abrupt shifts in language, it "generates tension and underscores the poet's wistful contemplation of time's evanescence."⁴

The prevalence of five end-stopped lines may suggest that it originates from Japanese tradition. This could not be further from the truth. Japanese tanka do typically have five phrases set in a pattern of 5/7/5/7/7 sound units, although this is not a hard rule. However, Japanese tanka are generally not printed on five lines, but rather in a single, often vertical, line.

Hiroaki Sato, in his 1987 essay, "Lineation of Tanka in English Translation," explores this issue at length.⁵ According to Sato, the single vertical line had become the standard practice in Japan by the latter half of the 19th century. Both before and after, however, some Japanese poets also advocated for other forms of lineation. For example, Ishikawa Takuboku advocated for two or three lines, depending on the poem:

We had already begun to feel a certain inconvenience, a certain unnaturalness, about writing a tanka down vertically in one line. So it's better to write certain tanka in two lines and certain others in three lines, depending on the rhythm of each piece. Although some say doing that destroys the rhythm of

⁴ Michael McClintock, Introduction xxxii, in *The Tanka Anthology* (eds. Michael McClintock, Pamela Miller Ness & Jim Kacian; Red Moon Press 2003).

⁵ Hiroaki Sato, "Lineation of Tanka in English Translation," 42 *Monumenta Nipponica* 3:347-56 (Autumn 1987); see also Hiroaki Sato, "Forms Transformed: Japanese Verse in English Translation," 11 *Mānoa* 2:100 (Winter 1999).

tanka itself, if the traditional rhythm begins to not get along with our feelings, we don't have to have any reservation about it.⁶

Despite this and other exceptions to the one-line format, Japanese poets rarely advocated for five lines. Sato even quotes Hagiwara Sakutarō as pronouncing that “there can never be a tanka in five lines.”⁷

Notwithstanding the Japanese tradition, prominent English language translators of Japanese tanka, including Sanford Goldstein, Ueda Makoto, and Stephen D. Carter, often cast their translations in five lines. This appears to be the origin of conventional lineation in English language tanka. But there are translations not in five lines as well. Indeed, translations are perhaps the one place with an abundance of tanka, in English, that are not presented in five lines. Kenneth Rexroth, for instance, translated some tanka in four lines, including in his well-known *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*; Juliet Winters Carpenter translated Tawara Machi's popular *Salad Anniversary* in three lines; and Sato himself translated in one line.

Despite its recent provenance, the five-line format, coupled with end-stopping, has become the mainstay of English language tanka. While this practice may have originated with translations, there are good reasons why it has persisted. Perhaps most apparently, the use of five end-stopped lines creates a distinct and visually pleasing block of text. This format makes tanka easily recognizable to anyone who has ever seen it. It also provides comforting familiarity for the tanka poet.

But beyond defining how a tanka looks, conventional lineation harmonizes remarkably well with other hallmarks of tanka poetry, including:

other hallmarks of tanka poetry, including:

- the short length of the tanka poem, typically ranging from 12-31 syllables,⁸
- direct expression of concrete, sensory images, juxtaposed with lyrical evocation of emotions and other aspects of human experience,
- use of pivot lines, and
- dreaming room for the reader to imagine and intuit meanings beyond those explicit in the text.

⁶ Id. at 352-53.

⁷ Id. at 355.

⁸ McClintock, *supra*, Introduction xxvi.

The reasons for this are complex, but well worth understanding, as they get into the heart of what makes tanka, tanka.

To begin with, when a tanka-length poem, typically of 12-31 syllables, is lineated in five lines, the result is five short lines. Each line rarely exceeds 7 syllables and almost never exceeds 10 syllables, unless an extra-long line is used for special effect. The short line length is a highly consequential choice. In English poetry, 10 syllables is “a kind of norm” that gives the sense of ordinary speech.⁹ Ten syllables, cast in unrhymed iambic pentameter, is also the line of blank verse and was the predominant form of versification of Shakespeare’s plays and of most English poetry until the twentieth century.¹⁰

A line fewer than 10 syllables thus varies from the norm. It suggests that something has been taken away or is missing. The paucity of syllables does not permit flowery elaborations, but rather demands a “stripped-down presentation of objects,” a “direct treatment of the thing.”¹¹ It encourages the use of highly compressed language and even irregular syntax, like missing articles.

At the same time, a shorter line contains a greater ratio of space to words; it is surrounded by “greater silence.”¹² This space is visual: our eyes perceive the white space at the end of each line. And when we move our visual focus to the beginning of the next line, there is a brief pause amid the transition. The space is also aural: when the poem is read, particularly when read aloud, we naturally pause at the end of the line.

The effect of these line-ending pauses is augmented by end-stopping. End-stopped lines break at a natural pause, for instance, at the end of a phrase, at a pause in speech, or after a verb or noun. End-stopping thereby presents each line as a coherent and basic unit of meaning. In tanka, each line often adds a new layer of meaning to the poem as a whole, akin to turning a five-sided jewel. A line not only provides context for the lines that follow it but often invites a reimagining of the lines that precede it. The short lines and preponderance of silence grant the reader space and time to savor each line’s transformational effects.

The transformative nature of each line is perhaps most pronounced in a pivot line. A pivot is a word or phrase that can be read in two or more ways. In tanka, a pivot typically connects two disparate images or ideas, threading them together into a unified tapestry.

⁹ Edward Hirsch, *A Poet’s Glossary*, line 349 (2014).

¹⁰ Id., blank verse 73-74.

¹¹ Id., line 349.

¹² Id.

Having short, end-stopped lines facilitates the use of pivots. It makes it easy to present pivots on a single line, or even multiple lines. While pivots can be any word or phrase, the use of an entire line (or lines) as a pivot, coupled with the lack of punctuation, facilitates reading the pivot with either the preceding or following line(s), enhancing the pivot's double meaning. The five-line form also presents five options for the location of a pivot line, most obviously the central lines (2-4), but also lines 1 and 5.

The above factors facilitate poetry that is:

- Dense in meaning, due to the brevity of the poem and of each line,
- Visually and aurally spacious, due to the high ratio of lines and line breaks to words, and use of end-stopping, and
- Multifaceted, with each short line adding a new layer of meaning.

These factors together facilitate dreaming room: readers are invited into the heart of a multi-faceted jewel dense with meaning and given the space and time to take their own adventure. Jane Reichhold put it like this: “because tanka leave more space between the images, both in actual space on a line and in the distance between the relationships of the images, there is much more room for the readers' minds to explore.”¹³

The following two poems, both published in the Winter 2022 issue of *Ribbons*, exemplify these qualities. The first is by Vandana Parashar:

**falling apart
stitch by stitch
I sit by the window
and sew a patch
on the quilt**

¹³ Jane Reichhold, “Lesson Four: Tanka as an English-Language Poetry Form,” *Wind Five-Folded School of Tanka* (2011).

With only 20 syllables, the poem directly presents a concrete image, with no explicit elaboration of emotions or any other abstract concepts. The lines progress and reinterpret the meaning of the poem:

- Line 1 tells us something is “falling apart.”
- Line 2 indicates this “falling apart” takes place “stitch by stitch,” a gradual but sure process, which harmonizes well with the short, end-stopped lines that give the reader time and space to contemplate this slow unraveling.
- But *what* is falling apart? The natural inference is some kind of cloth, but line 3 turns to human experience, suggesting the narrator’s own deterioration, perhaps physically, mentally, or both. The image of the narrator sitting by the window further conveys passive melancholy. The reader is invited to pause at the end of the line, gazing at the image of the narrator, just as the narrator may be gazing out of the window.
- Line 4 advances the story from passive melancholy to the narrator actively sewing the patch. The narrator changes from a mere object of deterioration to an active participant in wholesome transformation.
- Line 5 reaffirms our original intuition that this poem and the “falling apart” are also about a piece of cloth, namely a quilt. The lines of the poem have moved us from tangible object to intangible human experience and back.

In the end, lines 1 and 2 are revealed to be pivot lines, referring both to the quilt and to the narrator. Quilting is presented as a physical activity, a literary metaphor, and a genuine vehicle for healing.

The scene of this poem is ordinary: the narrator sits by a window, sewing a quilt that is coming apart. But the framing of this scene in five, end-stopped lines is extraordinarily artful. Each line presents a spare image that the reader is invited to contemplate in the space between the lines, weaving together a rich tapestry of visual, psychological, and even spiritual meanings.

The second poem is by Ken Slaughter.

atm

after midnight

I withdraw

five lines

from the dreaming bank

In only 17 syllables, the poem progresses from banality to suspense to expressing and embodying the writing process. The use of five, end-stopped lines is key to this progression:

- Line 1 presents a banal beginning: “atm.”
- Line 2 arouses suspense: “after midnight” invests the “atm” with a sense of physical and perhaps emotional darkness and potential danger.
- Line 3 extends the narrative: despite the late hour and potential danger, the narrator withdraws from the ATM.
- Line 4 creates a momentary sense of puzzlement: what does it mean to withdraw lines from the ATM? And why five lines?
- Line 5 resolves the tension and reveals that the poem is a metaphor for writing tanka.

The poem invites the reader to explore the relationship between the waking and dreaming worlds and the origins of poetry. Each line advances the extended metaphor with a new image and mood, and each line ending gives us space to contemplate the latest progression. Each line also skillfully illustrates many of the experiences that accompany writing: paying attention to commonplace objects, ideas for poems that arise at odd hours and in times of physical and emotional darkness and vulnerability, the poet’s active engagement with their writing, puzzlement and confusion, and ensuing resolution and revelation.

EXPERIMENTS WITH LINE

The above two poems illustrate how the conventional lineation of tanka bears remarkable power. Nonetheless, tanka poets do not need to be bound to conventional lineation. As already explained, the conventional lineation does not originate in Japanese tradition. And even though it does relate to the 5/7/5/7/7 structure of Japanese tanka, English language poets should develop the tanka form in light of the workings of our own language, just as we have done by abandoning the use of 5/7/5/7/7 in English tanka.

Ultimately, as with any other aspect of the poet’s toolkit, form should follow function. As James Longenbach writes in *The Art of the Poetic Line*, “truly to strain toward style, to write in one way rather than another way, is not to take a stand on prose or line or meter or rhyme: it is to discover what the language of a particular poem requires.”¹⁴ When artfully used, new formal choices can deepen

¹⁴James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line* (2008).

individual poetic expression and progress the craft of poetry. Experimentation with line is especially important, for line is a central principle of poetry. As Edward Hirsch states, “on its own, the poetic line immediately announces its difference from everyday speech and prose. It creates its own visual and verbal impact; it declares its self sufficiency.... ‘Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines.’”¹⁵

Let us now turn to some possibilities for alternate lineation. A natural place to begin is one-line tanka, which we may call “monoka,” similar to monoku with respect to haiku. There are several reasons to begin here. First is tradition. Unlike the conventional lineation, one-line tanka is consistent with the Japanese tradition of presenting tanka on a single line. Second is the existence of a venue for publication. The new journal *whiptail: journal of the single-line poem* accepts solely one-line poems, mostly monoku, but also one-line tanka. Few one-line tanka have been published there, but the editors’ expressed interest is a welcome sign. And finally, and most importantly, monoka, just like monoku, offer unique opportunities for poetic expression. Consider the following two kinds of monoka.

First are what we might call monoka of reverie. The inevitable result of setting a tanka on a single line is a rather long line. As noted above, the 10-syllable line is the norm in English poetry. A line that exceeds 10 syllables deviates from the norm. Since tanka almost always exceed 10 syllables, the line in monoka will too. In many cases, the exceedance will be quite significant. The extralong line in English poetry tends to generate a feeling of reverie and dreaminess.¹⁶ The effect can be accentuated when the line is a single unbroken utterance, or alternatively, a flowing stream-of-consciousness with irregular syntax and missing punctuation. Consider the following poem of mine, which was originally published in five lines:

**if the plum blossoms
receive the snow
without a word
why then do we
mourn?**

Compare this to the one-line version:

if the plum blossoms receive the snow without a word why then do we mourn?¹⁷

¹⁵ Hirsch, *supra*, line 349 (citing Longenbach, *supra*, xi).

¹⁶ See Id.

¹⁷ *Eucalypt* no. 32 (2022).

I should pause to note that depending on the format of publication—for instance, in the smaller width of a journal page—the one line may break into two or more lines. Nonetheless, the absence of line breaks remains clear, and thus the reader perceives the poem as a single, unbroken line.

In my view, the single line augments the sense of reverie already present in the poem’s meaning. This 18-syllable line is far longer than the “normal” 10. Coupled with the omission of internal punctuation that would occur were this a prose line (a comma after “word”), the single line suggests a dreamy stream-of-consciousness, in harmony with the narrator’s wandering and wondering as he contemplates plum blossoms, snow, and grief.

Another kind of monoka involves multiple potential cut points, which allow the reader to generate alternate readings and meanings that resonate with each other. This effect also occurs in monoku, where Jim Kacian eloquently described it as follows: “Multiple stops yield subtle, rich, often ambiguous texts which generate alternative readings, and subsequent variable meanings. Each poem can be several poems, and the more the different readings cohere and reinforce each other, the larger the field occupied by the poem, the greater its weight in the mind.”¹⁸

Consider the following poem of mine, again originally published in five lines:

**every morning
bowl of cornflakes
the fields
of my home country
grow within me**¹⁹

Setting this on one line with a few other changes yields the following:

every morning bowl of cornflakes growing within me the fields of my home country

¹⁸ Jim Kacian, “The Way of One,” *Roadrunner* X:2 (2010).

¹⁹ *Ribbons* (Summer 2020).

This poem has multiple potential cut points. “Morning” can be read as a noun (“every morning”) or an adjective (modifying “bowl”). The “cornflakes” could be “growing within me,” whether in a metaphorical sense or in a physical sense of absorbing fluids in the stomach. Or perhaps it is the “fields of my home country” growing within me, or both the cornflakes and fields growing within me.

These multiple cut points augment the meaning of the poem, which witnesses to the interdependence between the cornflakes, the narrator (“me”), and the fields of the narrator’s home country. The narrator eats the cornflakes, which are from the narrator’s home country and which in turn nourish the narrator, who becomes the continuation of the cornflakes and the home country. There is no obvious end or beginning to the narrator, cornflakes, or home country—just as the poem lacks a clear cut point to the exclusion of other cut points. Rather, the existence of all these entities is mutually interdependent and continuous, just as the poem runs together multiple meanings and images on a single unbroken line. Form and function are in harmony.

We can also present tanka, of course, in neither one nor five lines. Sometimes, a different number of lines just fits the poem better. There are no strict rules about this. Rather, just as in writing free verse, the poet considers each individual poem and decides what makes sense in light of the whole. Consider my poem, originally published in five lines:

lying in the spring meadow
naming the clouds
I am fascinated
by your
vocabulary of fish²⁰

The fourth line (“by your”) is unusually short at only two syllables. There is no good reason for this brevity. Combining the third and fourth lines avoids this awkward form and improves the poem.

lying in the spring meadow
naming the clouds
I am fascinated by your
vocabulary of fish

²⁰ *Hedgerow* no. 136 (2021).

Let us now turn from the number of lines to the line endings. As noted above, the vast majority of tanka have five end-stopped lines, and enjambment is rare. Yet, as in other forms of poetry, enjambment can be a powerful tool when used properly.

To understand what enjambment is and what it does, we have to first understand end-stopping. As noted above, in an end-stopped line, the line break harmonizes with the syntax by breaking at an expected place, for instance, the end of a phrase, a natural pause in speech, or after a verb or noun. The line break also invites the reader to pause, briefly, at the end of the line. Because this kind of line break accords with our expectations as readers, it generally conveys a sense of stability and order.

By contrast, an enjambed line cuts against the syntax, breaking the line at an unexpected place, such as in the middle of a phrase or after a conjunction or article. The line break invites the reader to pause, but the syntax pulls the reader forward, creating “a dialectical motion of hesitation and flow.”²¹ Because this kind of line break clashes with our reader expectations, it generally conveys a sense of movement, tension, and conflict. This is true in poetry generally, but especially so in tanka, given the predominance of end-stopping all the lines.

The precise effect of enjambment and end-stopping, however, depends on context. As Longenbach writes, “line doesn’t exist as a principle in itself. Line has a meaningful identity only when we begin to hear its relationship to other elements in the poem,”²² including other lines, syntax, sound, and meaning. Depending on its context, then, enjambment can produce one or more of several effects. These effects include:

- Emphasizing an unusual line-ending word that would not ordinarily be emphasized, such as a word in the middle of a phrase, in order to highlight its meaning or sound;
- Extending the length of a line, suggesting excess and overflow, or alternatively, shortening the line length, suggesting lack and empty space;
- Disrupting reader expectations and generating a feeling of experimentation and freedom, given that most tanka today are end-stopped; and
- When enjambment is used in combination with end-stopped lines, developing and dissipating the energy and movement in the poem, and thereby signaling the arc of the poem’s narrative.

²¹ Longenbach, *supra*, 204.

²² *Id.* at 5.

Consider the following poem by Stefanie Bucifal, published in the Winter 2022 issue of Ribbons:

dedicated
for hours
I envy
your notebook, envy
your pen

Ending line 4 with the enjambed word “envy” places special emphasis on this word. Aurally, the repetition of “envy” as the line-ending word for two consecutive lines creates an unusually powerful sonic stress on the second iteration. Semantically, this repetition suggests the narrator’s envy is crescendoing to such an extent that it even breaks normal bounds—of emotional regulation and of tanka lineation.

The accompanying shift in line lengths is also notable. Lines 1-3 are very short. Line 4 is much longer, both visually and aurally, due to the additional syllables provided by the enjambment as well as the midline caesura. Line 5 returns to a short line. This shift harmonizes with the narrative arc of the tanka. The narrator begins with objective observation (“dedicated/for hours”), which gives rise to emotion (“I envy”) that overflows into the extra long, enjambed line (“your notebook, envy”), before subsiding into a brief statement of observation (“your pen”).

Finally, the enjambment creates a sense of tension consistent with the poem’s meaning. With the line broken in the middle of a phrase (“envy/your pen”), the syntax pushes the reader forward. Meanwhile, the line break bids the reader pause, and the echo of the first instance of “envy” (from the third line) pulls the reader back. The reader is conflicted, pulled in multiple directions, just as the narrator alternates between objective, perhaps even admiring, observation (“dedicated/for hours”) and the reactive emotional overflow of “envy.”

Consider another poem, by me. Through this poem, we will explore how varying enjambed and end-stopped lines can develop and dissipate the energy of a poem.

**the sailboat
fading into a white cloud
slowly, without sound
you disappear
from my world²³**

In the original format, all five lines are end-stopped. This invites the reader to pause after and sit with each line, which develops a new layer of meaning. The pivot connects the disappearance of the sailboat and of “you.” This sense of disappearance is accentuated by the sonic change in the poem, with the preponderance of long vowels in lines 1-3 giving way to more short vowels in lines 4-5, as well as by the gradual decrease in the number of syllables in each line from line 2-5 (7, 5, 4, and 3 syllables). The poem makes good use of conventional lineation. Even so, we can vary the line endings to create a different effect.

**the sailboat
fading into a white cloud
slowly, without sound you
disappear from
my world**

In this version, the lines 1-2 and 5 are end-stopped, while lines 3-4 are enjambed. The end-stopped lines 1 and 2, together with the pleasant image, convey a sense of stability and calm. That is disrupted, first by the caesura, and then by the enjambment in line 3, which portends growing tension and disorder. Ending the third line on “you” gives it emphasis, consonant with the poem’s meaning: the poem is not really about a pretty boat scene, but rather the narrator’s profound loss, of “you.” The enjambment on line 4 continues the sense of disorder, and ending on the unstressed, insubstantial word “from” aligns with the sense of disappearance. The concluding line “my world” is end-stopped and restores us to a

²³ *Cattails* (Oct. 2021).

sense of stability. But, as is also true for the original version, the decreasing line lengths from lines 2-5 and the very short, two syllable line 5 suggest that, despite the relative calm ending, much has been lost.

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The above techniques are only the beginning of what is possible when we experiment with lineation in tanka. Further possibilities include the use of more than five lines, empty lines, and other white-space techniques, such as indentation, two or more consecutive spaces, and concrete poetry. I encourage the reader to experiment with lineation and experience the delight of discovering new forms of self-expression. In doing so, we will contribute to shaping this precious, evolving form of tanka in English.

Written by Ryland Shengzhi Li

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