# Twenty Tanka: Ten Australian Researchers on Playful Research Practices and Failure

### Julienne van Loon

My contribution to this collection takes the form of a creative work – a suite of twenty tanka – and an accompanying research statement. The research statement conforms to current Australian Research Council guidelines for non-traditional research outputs, that is, it is limited to 2000 characters and accounts for the research background, contribution, and significance of the work.

## Research Statement

In this non-traditional research output, phrases drawn verbatim from the transcripts of semi-structured narrative interviews I conducted with ten Australian research leaders are presented as a suite of tanka. The collection forms part of a larger study, ‘The play of research: an investigation into the role of play in leading and innovative Australian research’,[[1]](#footnote-1) in which I explore play as a practice, as a disposition, and as a crucial element in the production of new knowledge.

The tanka or ‘short song’, a lyric form traditional in Japan, requires a particular line and syllable count (5-7-5-7-7), placing an emphasis on the tension between constraint and lack of constraint.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here, reflections selected from the study’s transcripts focus on experiences of failure in research practice and on expressions of anxiety about such failure.

This work aims to reframe how we think about the creation of new knowledge and to normalize failure as a part of the playful risk-taking that is so crucial to research practice. In a higher-education sector hampered by managerialism and performance measurement,[[3]](#footnote-3) acknowledgements of research failure tend to be kept in check. Here I use tanka as method because it is a form open to lyricism even as it demands technical discipline. Accordingly, the suite experiments with the ‘irresolvable gaps and tensions’[[4]](#footnote-4) many recognize as a strength of the poetic form, while also tabling a discrete poetic catalogue of research failures.

## Creative work

### professor t: physical oceanography

two-thirds of the time

it’ll amount to nothing,

and it might take you

a day or three or a week

to figure out it’s rubbish.

### professor v: materials engineering

that was my biggest

fear, that all these grand ideas

would be parked on the

side, because I didn’t know

that it was going to work.

### professor k: applied mathematics

what’s going wrong and

why isn’t it compiling?

why is it giving

the wrong answers and where’s the

logic falling down and why?

### associate professor n: quantum physics

what I realized

was that I was counting wrong.

I was out dancing,

it was swing dancing, and I

was like, ‘holy shit! that’s it!’

### professor g: behavioral economics

we spent a lot of

time and we couldn’t make a

convincing statement.

a lot of people got lost:

they didn’t understand it.

### professor c: creative writing

it doesn’t always

follow. also, when your work

is rejected and

people don’t like it and

you like it, it’s that fine line…

### professor s: public health

you get it wrong, of

course, everybody’s wrong

at the moment, you’ve

got no monopoly on

being wrong. and people fail.

### doctor a: library and information studies

the problem in our

work is you can’t really,

I suppose in most

work, really, mistakes are not

tolerated [that] well.

### professor v: materials engineering

of course, it’s research.

not everything works out

the way intended.

so, okay, is there any

other way I can do this?

### doctor h: experimental music

there are rules but the

rules are sort of written in

real time. you either

have to make some up, or sit

back and listen and figure.

### professor k: applied mathematics

sometimes you can think

of a way of doing it,

but it’s not very

elegant. it’s nice to have

an elegant solution.

### associate professor n: quantum physics

but I really don’t

know how that happened. I mean

that was all in my

right brain, which I know is not

a real thing anymore, but…

### professor s: public policy

if it is about

doing things differently,

you will sometimes fail.

you have a great idea

and it just doesn’t work out.

### doctor a: library and information studies

in my previous

job I was so stressed at one

point I couldn’t let

anything in, I don’t think

you can… your brain just shuts down.

### professor c: creative writing

when we were talking

about play before, I was

thinking about a

very early memory

of being quite alone, and…

### doctor h: experimental music

if I say, ‘quiet,

delicate sounds’, I have to

make it explicit

to you what screwing that up

would be, so you make a note.

### professor s: public policy

…four years, and then we

ran out of money. so we

were continuing

on chewing gum and a shoe-

string, as someone explained it…

### professor t: physical oceanography

it took three to four

years, because it was being

rejected all the

time. my five best ideas

have all been rejected first.

### professor g: behavioral economics

yeah, sure, so, the one

right next to you is full of

papers that never

got published, they went round six,

or seven different journals.

### professor s: public health

oh dear, oh dear, oh,

dear. how much time do you have

for dreaming? is it

possible to just sit back

and say: what am I missing?

## Bibliography

Bullock, Owen. ‘Tanka Intrigue: The Short Poem of Deep Mysteries’, *TEXT* 26.1(2022): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.33894.

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Wilkinson, Jessica. ‘How poems make things happen’, *Sydney Review of Books,* 15 December 2020, https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/wilkinson-how-poems-make-things-happen.

1. For more information about this study see Julienne van Loon, ‘Let’s Play Knowledge-Makers’, *Axon: Creative Explorations* 7.1 (2017), https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/7-1/lets-play-knowledge-makers; Julienne van Loon, ‘In Defense of Play: A Manifesto Arrived at Through Dialogue’, in James Oliver (ed), *Associations: Creative Practice and Research,* Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2018, pp. 149-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Owen Bullock, ‘Tanka Intrigue: The Short Poem of Deep Mysteries’, *TEXT* 26.1(2022): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.33894; Bruce Ross, *Writing Haiku*, North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sharon Rider, Ylva Hasselberg and Alexandra Valuszewski, *Transformations in Research, Higher Education and the Academic Market*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jessica Wilkinson, ‘How poems make things happen’, *Sydney Review of Books,* 15 December 2020, https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/wilkinson-how-poems-make-things-happen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)