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**“Forget-me-nots”: Balancing Minds and Modes**

One need not read “Forget-me-nots” at all to notice its key design element; a cursory glance suffices to identify the prose envelope. The tanka of this work is enclosed by prose, with one paragraph preceding it and one to follow. This variation of the basic tanka prose unit was my first choice when I set out to write the piece in 2006. And with good reason: it is a solid structure that aims for and suggests stability—

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The work is about a tacit agreement between two strangers who struggle to keep their balance. For its subject matter I drew on an observation I had made in the nearby town of Minden, Germany. Initially, I was reluctant to employ the first-person perspective, as I was eager to move away, in my exploration of tanka prose, from the anecdotal approach towards the fairy tale. However, for “Forget-me-nots,” resorting to a lyrical self promised to provide just the right frame. And so the work begins with a disclosure:

I’ve discovered something that makes it easier for me to run my errands on busy Saturdays: of late there’s been a flower lady in a deep doorway between the upper and lower city.

The scene is set and the dramatis personae are introduced. But what a strange revelation it is. With it, I hoped to excite the reader’s curiosity right away. What kind of person would make such a confession, and what scheme would involve a flower lady? Moreover, I immediately applied a sense of time and pace (“busy Saturdays,” “of late”) as well as space (“in a deep doorway between the upper and lower city”). I like to create a panorama in tanka and tanka prose, and in this instance both time and space perform a specific function.

As the lyrical self describes the flower lady, the suggested hustle and bustle of the city fades into the background:

Her eyes are the color of water. Her skin is translucent, her hair, a bob, almost white. She doesn’t need a stall; she’s only got this one bunch of flowers anyway.

Here, vivid depiction and lulling repetitions serve to lure the reader into a more mysterious realm, where time is quasi non-existent. Details lend credence, whereas repetition creates an irresistible pull. Threefold repetition, at that, is a common device in fairy tales. And doesn’t the flower lady distantly remind one of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Match Girl*? Like her, she hides away in a recess. And like her, she tries to warm herself, be it with the help of flowers. One bunch after another warms her heart and keeps up her vision of what? A soul mate?

Next I had the lyrical self explain the moves required to get anywhere near the flower lady:

Coming from above, you won’t notice her, neither from below—she’s standing too far in the niche. That’s why I walk slowly uphill across the marketplace until, in her shy way, she moves closer at last.

These lines yield a three-dimensional impression of the setting while the careful maneuvering is made almost tangible by their intonation. Again, this adds to the verisimilitude of an otherwise queer episode. But there is more to it. The deep doorway, the upper and lower city as well as the sloping plane of the marketplace are equivalent to the personae’s states of mind. And all glances and moves within these coordinates correspond as such with attempts to recover balance. The setting *is* the theme—and so is the composition.

The phrase “to run my errands on busy Saturdays” in the work’s first sentence is roughly mirrored by the phrase “immersing myself in the restless city” in the last. I wanted them to embrace the work, thus enhancing the balanced layout of the prose envelope. Also, the effect of a change in pace throughout the piece is heightened this way, with the middle section being calmest. It is critical that the poem be enveloped by prose, not the other way around, because this arrangement underpins the work’s tenor: look closely, and you’ll find enough poetry in this prosaic world to warm your heart and balance your mind.

The tanka then, voices the part of a posy, which speaks in the flower lady’s place. The language of flowers has long been a popular means of communication, and in this amalgam of the fabulous and the everyday one would not be surprised to come upon it.

blue flowers  
tied with a ribbon, softer  
than a sigh—  
      without you blue hours  
      will never go by

The end rhyme (flowers—hours; sigh—by) however, is very unusual in tanka, if not frowned upon. For a poem emerging from a bouquet I considered it quite appropriate though. The mood evoked by rhyme was more important to me than observing any set rules or conventions regarding the genre. Furthermore, the rhyme does not come entirely unexpected; the preceding prose abounds with stylistic devices. Alliteration (notice—neither—niche; shy—she), consonance (why—walk—slowly—way), internal rhyme (uphill—until) and intonation prepare for the tanka’s rhyme and make it fit in naturally.

In the concluding prose paragraph the lyrical self describes the bouquet as “sighing” and indeed, the tanka is full of longing, whereas another bouquet is characterized as “dreaming.” With its focus on sensibility and yearning, its blend of prose and poetry, reality and the mysterious, and its apparent allusion to the Blue Flower of Romanticism, “Forget-me-nots” stands in the Western literary tradition rather than in the Japanese. For let us not forget, Western literature also boasts fine prose with lyrical insertions; most obviously in fairy tales, but also as lyrical passages in romantic works.

In later tanka tales I went further, writing an ekphrastic prose poem on a fairy tale by Andersen (“Beneath the Waves”), making up an entirely new tale (“Lose Me and You’re Lost”) and exploring the animal fable in the “Thistledown” series. Where animals and plants speak, they do so in tanka. And sometimes they even allude to poems that were written by man, centuries ago. But what is time?

**Forget-me-nots**

I’ve discovered something that makes it easier for me to run my errands on busy Saturdays: of late there’s been a flower lady in a deep doorway between the upper and lower city. Her eyes are the color of water. Her skin is translucent, her hair, a bob, almost white. She doesn’t need a stall; she’s only got this one bunch of flowers anyway. Coming from above, you won’t notice her, neither from below—she’s standing too far in the niche. That’s why I walk slowly uphill across the marketplace until, in her shy way, she moves closer at last. Without a word she then shows me her flowers. Just for a moment though, so that I won’t try to take them.

blue flowers  
tied with a ribbon, softer  
than a sigh—  
      without you blue hours  
      will never go by

So today it’s a sighing little bunch. The last one, with the anemones, had been dreaming. At times the old lady weaves in some brighter flowers; even so her bouquets always remind me of bruises. She never talks. And I don’t buy it; she’s not standing by her post for such a petty sale. She just wants her flowers to be seen, and I come to catch a glimpse of them before immersing myself in the restless city.

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