

Poet Profiles

Sanford Goldstein

By Ty Hadman

In 1964, long before most Americans were writing haiku, Sanford Goldstein had already established his habit of writing up to ten tanka every day and even more in times of crisis; a custom he continues even today.

The title of the first collection of Goldstein's tanka was *This Tanka World*, published by the Purdue Poets Cooperative Press at West Lafayette, Indiana that appeared in 1977. A sampling of the tanka Goldstein was writing at this time will surprise the reader with their brevity.

so quiet
this coffee
morning
even this pen
this spoon

over the coffee cup
this April day
all the old demons
march
out

this cafeteria self
I see
sitting
waiting
for some poem to eat

again
this catalogue
of past griefs
and I keep washing
the same dish

Though most of the tanka in *This Tanka World* reflect and resound with a deep sadness, surely the result of the recent death of his wife, there are such gems as:

cardinal red
in the February snow
I scatter
pellets of bread
hoping to stop some mad flight

In 1983, Juniper Press published his next collection as *Gaijin Aesthetics*. *Gaijin* (foreigner or outside person) was an apt word for Goldstein because at the time he wrote the tanka he was a guest professor in Niigata, Japan, on sabbatical from his usual position as Professor of English and Creative Writing at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, where he had begun teaching in 1956. When he retired as Professor Emeritus from Purdue, he continued to be a professor at Keiwa College in Japan. One of my favorites from *Gaijin Aesthetics* is:

wild goose
across
a chestnut moon:
I eat this sweet
before the bitter tea

Though Goldstein's first two books are now out-of-print, his 1992 tanka sequence, published by AHA Books as [*At the Hut of the Small Mind*](#) is still available as an online book that you are encouraged to read in its entirety.

Sanford Goldstein was recognized as the English-language authority on tanka when he was chosen to be the first judge of the *Mirrors* First International Awards in 1989. His own tanka:

jabbed for blood
and the vein missed;
oh, substitute nurse,
must I carry
your black and blue?

exemplified the model he wished for the new tanka writers. In his essay in *Tanka Splendor 1990* (AHA Books) Goldstein wrote: "I feel Takuboku [Ishikawa Takuboku, whose books *Romaji Diary* and *Sad Toys* Goldstein translated with Seishi Shinoda, Charles C. Tuttle, 1985] comes closest to analyzing the modern tanka when he says in one of his essays, "Poetry must not be what is usually called poetry. It must be an exact report, an honest diary, of the changes in a man's life." He called his tanka "sad toys", and in another essay he said his poems were no more than what he was actually thinking, actually feeling, at that brief moment. So I believe that modernity in tanka, even in haiku, must go beyond the pretty, the

beautiful, the splendid – though these elements may of course appear in tanka or haiku."

Since this was written, English tanka writers have proved that they could use poetics, which Takuboku (and often Goldstein) tended to ignore, like parallelism and the pivot while taking tanka to levels where it had not been before. Still, in other ways, Goldstein continued to pioneer and to redefine his ideas of tanka.

For the several years of the magazine's too-short life, Sanford Goldstein was co-editor, with Kenneth Tanamura, of a journal of tanka named from one of Sanford's poems – *Five Lines Down*. It was during his association with Tanamura that Goldstein wrote his first collaborative linked tanka sequence as was published in AHA Books publication *Mirrors* in 1994, titled:

"A Double Tanka String #2 the short poem":

(Poems on the left are by Sanford Goldstein and those on the right are from Kenneth Tanamura.)

all this talk
of what's a haiku?
what's a tanka?
oh, you short-poem enthusiasts
what's *wabi*? what's *sabi*?

inexplicable
like something spilled
this yearning
that becomes
the moment's flash

what's this Dickinson
music I hear
in slants
of light
even before winter?

and with spring approaching
how can
these five-lines-down
capture the length
of my desire?

like a crutch
for walking through brambles,
impossible ruts,
this tanka world,
at midnight, at dawn

asking with each poem
"Do I dare
disturb the universe?"
while in these coffee shops
the women come and go

I wake
to know, know
this sharing
by fives
is so finite, so small!

bits of experience
separated like countries
by vast seas
caste, color and tongue. . .
these tanka moments

From this Goldstein gave symbiotically linked tanka, as first done by Jane and Werner Reichhold in their 1993 book, *Oracle*, this appellation as a double tanka string. As Goldstein writes in the foreword of *This World of Tanka Strings*: "First the tanka string. By this I mean poems tied to a single subject. Ideally all poems in a tanka string are connected at every point in the same way a string is connected infinitely by miniscule atoms. The Japanese, as Professor Shinoda informed me, do not make any distinction between "tanka strings" and "tanka sequences." . . . No, the Japanese use the word *rensaku* for any series of tanka taken as a unit. Mokichi say the word for a tanka sequence (*rensaku*) was first used in January, 1902, by his teacher Sachio Ito (died 1913) in his essay "*Rensaku no Shumi*" ("A Taste for Tanka Sequence").

And Goldstein was correct when he also wrote in the same introduction: "I believe my own tanka sequence *At the Hut of the Small Mind* is perhaps the first extended tanka sequence. . . Certainly my sequence must be the longest (120)."

Though Goldstein had been writing clusters of tanka around a single event, person, experience, thought or feeling, it was only during the five years [1980 – 1985] when he was translating Mokichi Saito's book, *Shakko (Red Lights)* he realized the power of the sequence with the poems written by Mokichi Saito upon the death of his teacher Sachio Ito. From a discussion of the difference between a sequence that orders the stanzas in a chronological dramatic order and a string that has its links tied to a central subject (often the title of the poem).

The reader can see here in "A Double Tanka String #2 the short poem" that though there is a linkage between stanzas, all the poems are centered around the central subject of the short poem. This is a giant departure from collaborative tanka sequences which are linked

following the principles of renga in which the links relate only to the previous and the following one and do not carry a common subject or narrative line.

"Buddha: a tanka string" which was picked to represent Sanford Goldstein in *Wind Five Folded* (AHA Books:1996) begins with his most excellent tanka:

Buddha,
pour me a cup of poetry
from your warm mouth
this empty
night

The major exposure and discussion here has been of Sanford Goldstein's position as a tanka poet. Still others may know him better as translator of Japanese tanka and literature with Seishi Shinoda. Samples from their best-known collaborations would include:

Softly I pushed open
That door
We call a mystery,
These full breasts
Held in both of my hands.

from Akiko Yosano's *Tangled Hair* (Tuttle:1987),

Somehow
It's like visiting the grave of a first love,
This being in the suburbs.

from Takuboku Ishikawa's *Sad Toys* (Tuttle:1985),

somehow
this sadness
looking
at the coarseness of the girl
I'm sleeping with tonight

from Mokichi Saito's *Red Lights* (Purdue University Press:1991)

from Shiki Masaoka's *Songs from a Bamboo Village* (Tuttle:1998)