

review

POETRY

IT TAKES ONE TO TANKA

Naomi Wakan venerates human contact in a cold world

The Way of Tanka
by Naomi Beth Wakan
(Shanti Arts Publishing \$20.00)

BY PHYLLIS REEVE

BORN IN ENGLAND IN 1931, NAOMI DEUTSCH came to Canada in 1954 and worked as a psychotherapist in Toronto.

She and her second husband **Elias**, a wood sculptor, married in 1977. Together they chose their surname Wakan, a Sioux word meaning "creative spirit."

The couple moved to B.C. in 1982 and founded Pacific Rim Publishers in 1986 in Vancouver, moving to Gabriola Island ten years later.

Her new anthology explores tanka, a Japanese poetic form consisting of five lines.

HAVING LIVED IN JAPAN for two years, **Naomi Wakan** became a practitioner and teacher of haiku, hosting workshops and contributing on an international scale.

Haiku is known to most readers of poetry as three-line poems. She has treated haiku exhaustively in previous books, especially *The Way of Haiku* (Pacific Rim Publishers, 2012).

More recently, she has found her way to tanka. In **The Way of Tanka**, a chapter called "Tanka compared with Haiku" explains tanka as "five-line poems that move from image to image, idea to idea, feeling to feeling, yet the whole five lines flow together seamlessly to present a strong statement of humanity's place in the universe, even though the poem may be intensely personal."

The five lines follow a pattern: short, long, short, long, long. To clarify the distinction, she offers an example of each on a similar topic.

First, a haiku by **Devar Dahl**:
*empty cabin
the beached canoe
fills with leaves*

Then a tanka by **Christopher Herold**:
*in the morning fog
we slip our oars and drift
between loon calls
all that's left of the world
the warmth of our bodies*

Wakan elaborates: "The haiku speaks only of images: an empty cabin, a canoe filled with leaves. Yet, on consideration, it is clear to us that this haiku clearly speaks of the impermanence of things, using just those images with no overt indication of this inner idea."

"The tanka also has a strong sense of images: the drifting boat, the loon's call, but it allows itself a comment that directs our thoughts to the high value of human contact in a cold world."

There is nothing new about this sort of poetry in the English language. The early modernists who called themselves Imagists learned from Japanese poets. If none of the tanka quoted by Wakan attain the impact of **William Carlos Williams' Red Wheelbarrow** or **Ezra Pound's petals on a wet black bough**, most approach an intensity and focus worth striving for.

As a mentor, Wakan has felt moved to offer a way "to bridge the gap between what people wanted to express and what they were able to express, the chasm between inner and outer lives."

Naomi Wakan recalls a comment once made of her poetry, that it is really prose until you come to the last line.



THE WAY OF TANKA BEGINS WITH A selection of fifty tanka. Only after readers and would-be writers have digested these, does the instruction begin.

Chapters address the uses and varieties of tanka, love tanka, nostalgic tanka, witty tanka, response tanka [two poets carry on a conversation in alternate tanka], ekphrastic tanka [tanka describing another work of art, e.g. a painting], tan renga [first three lines by one poet, last two by someone else] and tanka as self-expression.

The discipline involved in a tanka, like that in any traditional form whether it be sonnet or villanelle, can calm the poet's eye. That said, most readers of this book will have dabbled in haiku and be ready to move on—or to move back and forth, depending on the day and the mood.

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Retired librarian **Phyllis Parham Reeve** is co-founder of the bookstore at *Page's Resort & Marina on Gabriola Island*.



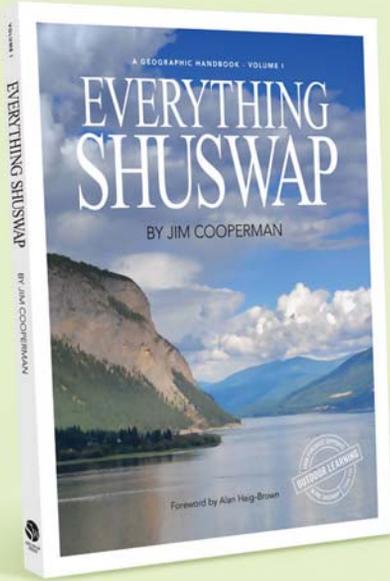
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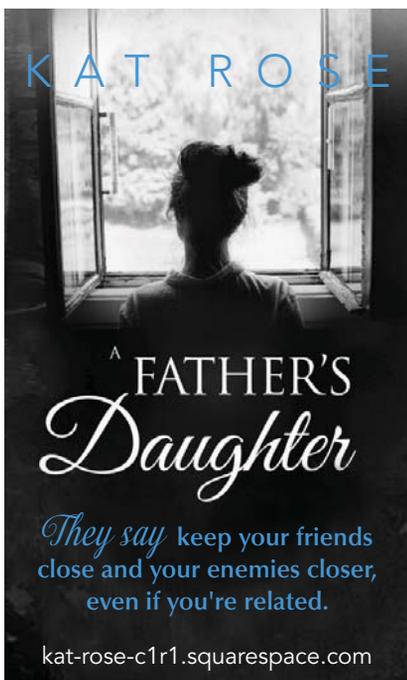


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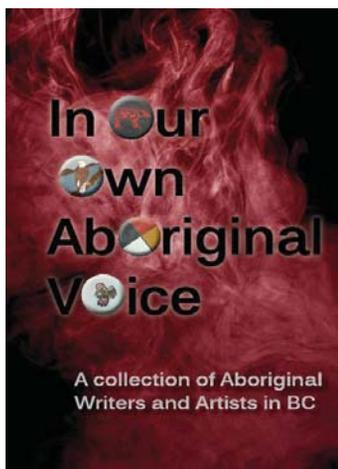
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