

Asking for Trouble: Tanka by Czandra. Hatley, QC: Yarrow Press, an imprint of Shoreline Press, 2022. 978-1-9906570-1-6 shorelinepress.ca/AskingForTrouble.html.

I have been privileged to hear poems by Czandra (aka Sandra Stephenson) in our writing group KaDo. A scattered poem in progress every quarter of the year or so is enough to enjoy, but it is an entirely other scale of pleasure to have a whole freaking tanka collection in hand. This intense, coherent collection is revealing and insightful.¹

A sense of poetry pervades even the section titles: love these days, a kiss is not enough, thickening furies, and poplar fluff. The foreword mentions thoughtfulness, courage and gentle restraint. I would concur and add humour to the list.

the son who travels
music fest to music fest
will not allow
his father or me
to sing in the car

p. 51

The first section, love these days, are poems of romance of a long-time couple that really warm my heart cockles. Here is one that gave me goosebumps.

in the shower
before his dentist appointment
my husband shampoos his beard
the soap slips
from his hand to mine.

p. 39

The intimacies and negotiations and love shining through these poems are very good for the heart. If I might add one more,

I invite him to help me
choose a spot
for the iris
a gardening
concession

p. 40

The tension and playfulness are balanced with poems of that particular ache of life with aging parents.

scrap paper scoresheets
from cribbage games
she's forgotten the rules
my heart
with child

p. 45

Isn't that a striking and novel image the tanka closes with. It takes a risk and it evokes a weight and a promise. It pivots weight from Line 4, which presents as if a hand over heart of the loss of someone else's memory then deepens in L5.

I am sometimes wary of tanka as vehicle beset with loose sentiment, generic adjectives and truisms, but this collection steers clear. The pathos is not easy nor cliché but comes at a unique angle. It goes to show that I haven't read one tanka, read them all. These tanka are alert and intelligent.

towels on the clothesline
stiff as boards
so the neighbours
understand
sublimation?

p. 56

There's a classic country image, and a movement as if to ponder, what will the neighbours think, in a world where land covenants ban clothes lines, the concern isn't about wagging tongues, but science understanding.

There's a self-deprecation and a truthiness of basic human nature at the same time. For example, two poems from page 83.

long-horned beetle
without a name
dies in a bottle
waiting for me
to find out if its harmful

People die for lack of understanding every day, and bugs also pay the price for our ignorance and fear. How to self-soothe or correct course when the world is too much but to take refuge in acknowledging and letting go or holding on, where relevant

I can't let myself
enjoy anything
because
the polar ice
is melting.

It's such a lovely physical object that I couldn't find myself marking pages so am forced, happily, to re-read the whole, to find more poems you should have within you if you don't yet have this collection on your shelf.

¹An interview with her about her book is posted at pesbo poetry blog: pearlpirie.com/mini-interviews-czandra.

Review by Pearl Pirie

