

Naomi Beth Wakan

A Roller-coaster Ride

Thoughts on aging



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Books by Naomi Beth Wakan

Book Ends: A year between the covers

Compositions: Notes on the written word

Haiku: One Breath Poetry

Late Bloomer: On Writing Later in Life

Segues

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Published in Canada by Poplar Press, a division of Wolsak and Wynn Publishers Ltd., Hamilton.

Cover image:

Cover design: Julie McNeill

Author's photograph: Eli Wakan

Typeset in Stone Serif

Printed by Ball Media, Brantford, Canada



The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Book Fund.

The Canada Council
for the Arts | Le Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Poplar Press

#102 – 69 Hughson Street North
Hamilton, ON
Canada L8R 1G5

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Sections of this book were previously published in *Senior Living Magazine* as “The Lovely Old Biddy,” “Memories Through Poetry” and “My Robot House.”

The nostalgia tanka in “Looking Back” were reprinted from *Nostalgia and the Attic*, with permission from my co-author, Alice Rich.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Wakan, Naomi

A roller-coaster ride : thoughts on aging / Naomi Beth Wakan.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-894987-64-6

1. Aging--Social aspects. 2. Aging--Psychological aspects.
3. Wakan, Naomi. I. Title.

HQ1061.W34 2012

305.26

C2012-900480-4

To Eli, who promised, and kept his word,
to grow old along with me.

And to Dr. John Sloan, who still does house calls
and treats his fragile patients as individuals. If he
had ten thousand clones, the Canadian health care
system would be in much better shape.

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Introduction

Though I am in my eighties now, I do not seem to have moved into the calm and wisdom that people promised me old age would bring. My life is more like a roller coaster. Some days I feel totally part of the universe. Life seems interconnected and meaningful and the words flow from me as if coming from a deep source. Death slots in naturally as all things come into being and pass away. Other times everything falls to pieces. The world outside seems menacing and fearful and death a losing game. So fittingly, my publisher and I chose *A Roller-coaster Ride* as the title for this collection of essays and poetry on aging.

Writing around the topic of aging is bound to bring up memories and from moment to moment as I wrote the book, I have to confess I have been trapped in nostalgia for times of great happiness. But the traps didn't catch me for too long, for, ever practical, and a survivor by bloodline, the continual urge to create the most attractive present possible brought me back to my little cottage on Gabriola Island. One of the nostalgic memories was of my teen years in Blackpool,

a honky-tonk-style town in Lancashire, to which our family had been evacuated during the war. It was a roller-coaster kind of town both literally and metaphorically, for it had a Golden Mile of sideshows, rides and roller coasters to amuse the day trippers to the seaside. In summer the town was a mess of folks from the mill towns, fish and chip papers, dirty postcards and Blackpool Rock – a candy cane with the word “Blackpool” miraculously written throughout the stick. In winter, the sandy beaches were bare of holidaymakers, of donkey rides, of everything. A solitary pair, such as my twin and I, could wander them at leisure, like two characters in a French movie.

I write about the small and personal. I am the sort of person Friedrich Nietzsche describes as one “who never penetrates into the depths of a problem, yet often notices things that the professional with his laborious poring over it never does.” Or better yet, I am, like Geoff Dyer, “a literary and scholarly gatecrasher, turning up uninvited at an area of expertise, making myself at home.” I have rarely seen death close-up, have never accompanied a person through the stages of dying, and hardly ever go to funerals or wakes. Neither can I write about the intensities of aging. I can, however, write about the small concerns of an eighty-year-old person – my fears, my pleasures... No big moral statements, no big dramas, just a lot of questions; questions that you might also be asking. So please join me on my journey into aging.

The Inner Me

My publisher wrote to me before my last book, *Book Ends: A year between the covers*, came out, to ask me whether I would mind being called that “lovely old biddy from Gabriola” on advertising copy. I said, “not at all, go right ahead.” I love to let my publisher do what she wants as much as I can, for that allows me to argue over the odd comma I want inserted when I really want it. After the book was launched, a concerned friend wrote to me, “I want to suggest that you discard the ‘old biddy’ bit you have in your information material. It’s self-denigrating, stereotyping, a kind of ‘ageism,’ and unworthy of your notions of self-esteem.”

I wrote back explaining how that phrase had originated by telling her that I was having a printing job done in Nanaimo, the closest town on Vancouver Island to the small island of Gabriola, where I live. The printer couldn’t offer perfect binding, so the job had to partially go down to Victoria. My printer sent an email accompanying the job, and, by mistake, the email got sent to me. It began, “I have

this lovely old biddy from Gabriola..." I laughed out loud when I read it and thereafter repeated the story endlessly at my readings. It was always good for a laugh, and laughter is good.

I was not demeaning myself, because I have a very firm image of myself as a bright, enthusiastic, but rather flighty young woman. That image has kept me going all my life while I achieved a moderate degree of success in several areas. Particularly it has allowed me to recognize my limits, and to see what a clown I basically am, yet know at the same time what a wise clown I am also. This image has taken me cheerfully through menopause and successfully into old age. From outside, people see a slightly stooped elder person with grey, thinning hair. I see that too when I look in the mirror. Inside, however, I am this bouncing, precocious, imaginative kid, naive with the kind of naivety that paradoxically becomes a kind of street smarts.

That inner image is important, even if it is only partially correct, for that is the image that sustains us through the years of possible indignity and non-caring. I'll give you another example. I have a friend who was a cute child and a cute, precocious teenager. She kept this image of being beautiful and youthful with her even though she now is wrinkled and obviously old. Recently she was in a poor country and was riding a bicycle through an unknown part of town. A man leapt out and knocked her from her bicycle. Her first thought was "he is going to rape me." She curled up tight and scrunched her eyes. Nothing happened. When she opened her eyes she could see the man off and away on her bicycle. It was the bike he wanted, not her beautiful body. She yelled after him to no avail but, because she is

young and beautiful inside, she could allow herself to laugh. Laughing at her own foolishness was not degrading to her, it was empowering. She is not going to give up the image of her inner self, it maintains her. She is, however, intelligent enough to know it doesn't match how she is viewed by others.

Recently, I emceed an evening for a group of campus radio folk. While preparing for the event, I supposed their average age would be twenty-one. I am eighty. I wondered how on earth I was going to say anything of relevance for their already over-sophisticated ears to take in. I don't have much energy for fretting, however, as my writing is demanding and I am also a housekeeper and garden-weeder and wife and mother and many other things that make more pressing demands on my energies. I decided to just be myself – the outer self would wear something simple and elegant, something Meryl Streep might wear to the Oscars when all the other actors look like streetwalkers. The inner self would be the usual gawky, awkward, disarmingly open person I basically am; amusing people by just telling the truth as I see it, and throwing remarks around regardless of total appropriateness, because I have never bothered much about being appropriate.

Aging cannot be avoided. You will become, whether you like it or not, pushed to the edge of the crowd, rather than being the centre of attention. Unless you are very wealthy, you will be slipped in as an afterthought, called in from a reserve list of substitutes, smiled at benignly when you offer an opinion. If your inner image is still running along with you, as your shadow accompanies you on your outer edge, you will float through it all, assured that you still have value,

and presenting your duck's feathers for the water of old-age prejudices to merely run off. You're cute, you're intelligent, you're beautiful, you're wrong...but how right you really are.

Shoulder pads

*I always wanted to be
a cool tall woman with
shoulder pads who spoke
little, but knew where
she was going, or even
a cool tall woman with
shoulder pads who
spoke a lot and gave
orders in all directions,
knowing one of them
would be where she was going.
Or a small quiet ruthless
woman, who held her cards
close to her chest and also
knew where she was going.
My breasts were too big
to hold anything close
to my chest, so I smothered
and mothered my way through
life with not the slightest
idea of where I was going.
Now the women and I,
shoulder pads or not, are
all drawing our pensions
and it doesn't seem to matter
a jot whether we knew, or didn't
know where we were going.*

Where's My Chin?

The difficulty of growing old is that one doesn't know what to do, through want of experience, [and] helplessly watches the waves breaking and civilisation growing older at the same rate as oneself. In youth experience is unnecessary: in age we count on it and, generally speaking, only act successfully when it is to hand. Inverted adolescence. The decay of our powers more puzzling than their birth, because our consciousness was born with them, but here it lags behind, looking at the symptoms and unable to decide which is to be taken seriously. Apart from its discomfort, it's so baffling.

– E. M. Forster, *Commonplace Book*

I had no hot flashes at menopause; apart from the ceasing of my monthly flow of blood, I had no symptoms at all. One day I looked in the mirror and was surprised that my chin didn't seem to be as firmly defined as usual. That was that. I was growing old. Others too seem to have caught their first sight of their aging by a similar glance in a mirror. A friend reported to me, "I was at a postural reconstruction therapist. She works with the client naked and lying on the carpet. Beside me on the carpet was propped a large mirror. As she

was working on me, I happened to glance in it. My God! My skin is sagging, I thought. I was fifty at the time.”

When I asked my husband, Eli, of his first intimation of aging he said, succinct as always, “The first time I hurt and I hadn’t caused it.” The writer Shirley Langer told me,

It was easy to say at fifty that ageing wouldn’t bother me. I could still look in the mirror and see what people would call “an attractive woman.” The hair thick, streaks of iron gray glinting amongst the chestnut. Eyes not bagged. Crow’s feet still subtle. The line of the lips distinct, not pruning. No dewlap swaying under the chin. Bristle facial hair limited to a mere few on the upper lip, and one, always the same one, on the chin. Flesh everywhere holding firm, the belly following normal childbirth curves. Toenails as yet unthickened. Veins visible, but not raised and rosy. The upper body distinct from the lower, not yet telescoped downward, obliterating the waist. Still satisfied, I would chastise people who weren’t growing old gracefully. Now, at sixty three, I feel different, because everything has changed. Today the mirror reflects all of those characteristics of age that were bidding their time within that woman of fifty.

My friends don’t seem to have had it as easily as I have. They dye their hair odd colours (both men and women) to cover the grey – I discovered, the one time that I tried this,

that grey hair is not so easily coloured, and in my case turned to pink. It was an experiment I never bothered repeating. Dyeing hair is to medicalize grey hair as some kind of disease, I feel. My women friends pluck their eyebrows – I pluck my chin hair – and they increase the amount of eyeshadow and mascara they apply in their urgent need to stay young and female until they almost look like transvestites. In my youth, I used face powder, nail polish and eyeshadow until my husband, Eli, in his usual way of asking seemingly naive but often cunning questions, asked me why I was putting plastic on my nails. I dropped all cosmetics cold turkey that day.

The mother of one of my friends spent a load of time putting on her makeup before she would appear in public; even the public of her immediate family. I asked her about this, and she said that she didn't want to cause people the distress of seeing her old and frail. Such a thought would never occur to me. I am what I am and I can't be bothered pleasing other people, protecting them from the knowledge of sickness, old age and death. The effort I save by not bothering with makeup can be used to write a good poem every day and that's what gives me joy. When I am joyful I can help other people be joyful and that is better than defending them from the knowledge that youth will pass.

As one ages, hair does seem to move around the body though. In men it seems to disappear from the top of the head and transports itself to nostrils and ears. In my case the once thick head-hair has moved to the chin. I remember a local Gabriolan doing a monologue on aging and putting in a request that when she was really old would her children please remember to pluck her chin hair. I pluck mine; still

having the vestige of the idea that women shouldn't be growing beards.

As far as using perfume to recapture youth, our island is almost a perfume-free zone. The other day someone heavily perfumed sat beside me. At first I was puzzled as to where the smell was coming from so rarely does scent enter the atmosphere on Gabriola; even aftershave and deodorant smells are absent. No, we don't all smell of the sweat of our labours, we have water (however limited in supply it is) and scrubbing brushes.

My husband, Eli, gave me Chanel No. 5 for my birthday. Eli's gifts to me don't usually run to perfume. He is more likely to offer a paper wasp's exquisite little nest, the first flowering branch of our quince tree or a piece of intricate lichen fallen from a log in the woodshed. However, we had recently watched the DVD *Coco Before Chanel*, with the exquisite actress Audrey Tautou. I suppose it was then that I had wished out loud for a bottle of No. 5 for my eightieth. I should mention that this was before I read Hal Vaughan's book *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel's Secret War*, which tells of Chanel's Nazi collaboration. I was, of course, surprised at Eli's gift since I knew that nowhere on our small island was Chanel No. 5 available. I had noticed that a small package had been delivered, but ignored it, just telling myself that the Lee Valley catalogue had scored yet once more. As I have to use my perfume discreetly out of the house, I secretly splash it behind my ears when I load the washing machine. It smoothes the laundry process wonderfully.

Does old age have its own smell? I read of the smell of old men and I suppose it is similar to that of anyone who forgets to tend to their teeth, armpits and clothes; but is there a smell

of aging and decay such as the one we can smell as plants wither in nature? When I googled for information, I found that there was such a smell produced by the body – it comes from a chemical known as “noneal.” The chemical occurs with the breakdown of a fatty acid in the skin, palmitoleic acid. Noneal’s smell is a greasy one and chemists call it the natural body odour of aging.

Yes, physical signs of aging do usually creep up on one unawares. Take hearing loss, for example. One minute you miss a few words in a joke that you and your friends are sharing, so you lose the thread of the story, though you laugh uproariously with them to cover; the next, you can no longer hear any of those mournful poets who accompany their words by strumming on a guitar.

It is said that at forty you get your true face, meaning, I suppose, that by that age you have cleared out most of the conditioning your family and life in general has laid on you, and your “true” self has emerged. I know something traumatic happened when I was forty, for it was then that I acquired a new husband, a new career, a white streak in the front of my hair and a pre-cancerous breast lump. But as to gaining my “true” face, I don’t know. Martin Amis comments on this rather cynically in his book *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov: And Other Excursions*, “It used to be said that by a certain age a man had the face that he deserved. Nowadays, he has the face he can afford.” By the time one is eighty though, I think the real “you” has settled onto your features. The etched wrinkles of frequent smiling or frowning show your tendency to have approached life one way or the other. While your quality of hair may define your state of health, its colour tells of your need to disguise and resist the aging

process. The way you hold yourself as you walk tells of your attitude and self-evaluation. Stooped, allows for ideas of life having broken you down. Ramrod, and you have defied the worst. My daughter constantly demands that I put my shoulders back, and gave me the useful bit of advice that this can be achieved by walking forward but pretending you are walking backwards. It sounds paradoxical and impossible, but it actually works.

While we are dwelling on the physicals of growing old, I should remind myself regularly to not dwell on externals. This because I just looked at a photo in one of our local island papers of an older couple celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. They look rather dowdy and definitely corpulent. As I read the article about them I see that thirty-five years ago they won awards for ice dancing. In a flash I have reduced their figures and dressed them in sparkles and yes, yes, I can see them and can join them in celebrating their achievements.

I have a nonagenarian friend who never leaves her apartment unless her hair is just so, her clothes immaculate and her nails...well it's her nails I want to tell you about. I know she has been a gardener in the past, but her hands bear none of the scars that mine have. They have a few pale liver spots on them, but are exquisitely smooth and each finger is tipped with a pale and discreetly pink-varnished nail. Each nail has a perfect moon and the growing edge is perfectly curved. Every time I meet her, my eyes go immediately to her hands. I wonder how many hours a week she spends on manicure and creaming. My hands, however, are not as this. The nails are dirty from garden soil that I can't quite get out, the moons cannot be seen, even on the thumb, since

I never get around to trimming the cuticle, and the general feel of my skin is rough as a dish scraper. I suppose I could write my autobiography using my hands to tell the tales, for one thumbnail is still split down the middle from being shattered when caught in a bread-cutting machine while I was running a youth club in the slums of Birmingham. It was towards the end of my university term and so the thumb was treated both in the university town's hospital and in my hometown hospital, where an ex-boyfriend was lying in a polio cast (this was before polio vaccination) and that introduces altogether different memories from the past. One of my index fingers got spaded by my husband as we frantically dug holes together on a five-acre property we once owned, in order to plant apple trees that had just been torn up when a neighbouring orchard was being bulldozed into the ground. So the thumbnail and the fingernail each bring back a dozen memories when I have to give them attention, which I do frequently since they are split and cause snagging.

From the scar over my eye acquired by bouncing around on my parents' bed when a very young child, to an Achilles tendon scar acquired by dancing the hora too frantically in my middle years, to a lower abdomen scar that I actually cannot remember how it came about, to a recent mastectomy scar, my body is a road map of my life. I chose my hands to trail backwards.

Carolyn Heilbrun, a strong feminist who wrote a mystery series under the pseudonym Amanda Cross, was a blunt woman and she declared her views of the aging woman this way, "I suggested that aging might be gain rather than loss, and that the impersonation of youth was unlikely to

provide the second span of womanhood with meaning and purpose.”

I myself have little patience with aging people who can't bear looking in the mirror. "Go inside," I want to say to them. "Go inside and dig up something there that is worth looking at. You must have something you value in there. If you can't find anything, change your way of life right now. There's still time to create some worthy image from the bits of your life. I won't believe there isn't. When you've found it, then whatever appears in the mirror you'll realize is merely a fraction of the whole you."

Beach glass

Will someone take me aside now?

*Now that the tides have
thrown me on beaches
and drawn me under
times beyond count.*

*Now that the waters
have tumbled me
this way and that,*

*so the sandstone
has blunted all
sharp edges and*

*I curl within,
my boundaries softened.*

*Will someone take me aside now,
thinking me worth considering
from time to time?*



Naomi Beth Wakan has written over forty books, including *Segues*, *Late Bloomer: On Writing Later in Life*, *Compositions: Notes on the written word* and *Book Ends: A year between the covers*. Her book *Haiku – one breath poetry* was an American Library Association selection. Her essays, haiku and tanka have appeared in many magazines and anthologies and have been broadcasted on the CBC. Naomi lives on Gabriola Island with her husband, sculptor Elias Wakan.