

Vital Signs, by Deborah P Kolodji (Lakewood, Ohio: Cuttlefish Books, 2024). 88 pages; 4" × 6". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-7350257-8-0. Price: \$10.00 from www.cuttlefishbooks.wixsite.com/home

Reviewed by Lorraine A Padden

With her book *Vital Signs*, Deborah P Kolodji leaves us the indelible presence of a haiku life lived to the fullest. Passing away from cancer at the height of her creative prowess, and only months after this volume was released,* Kolodji offers us a highly personal collection of moments along her journey through illness. This book invites us to witness both vulnerable truth and transcendent hope, both debilitating affliction and graceful abiding. *Vital Signs* is Deborah P Kolodji's ELH master class in generosity of spirit and skill.

Haiku about overt suffering can be difficult to take in, which is not to say that adversity doesn't appear in contemporary haiku practice. The genre is replete with poems about the ebb and flow of life, the natural cycles of seasons, beings, and things as they arise and inevitably pass away. Often, these poems are rendered such that readers might be reassured that despite eventual loss, spring will come again. With cancer however, natural cycles have nothing to do with radical derailment that can result from the grievous assault of ravaging disease; spring could be long gone. Desolation easily becomes a norm when timelines are ruthlessly hijacked. In light of this context, it comes as no surprise that seasonal references of deepening cold appear in Kolodji's collection:

hours swollen
with loneliness
colder days

unfilled prescription
for pain meds
winter desolation

Bleak reality is certainly foregrounded here, and several poems lean into the plain truth of the cancerous matter, naming Kolodji's calamity directly or referencing facets and phases of its treatment:

whistleblower PET scan

beige curtains

between infusion chairs

my shrinking world

Observations made within the confines of indifferent technologies are strikingly paired with brightly-hued humanity slowly drained of its vibrancy. Less dramatic but equally poignant moments also make up this cloistered view:

fluid infusion

bamboo wind chimes

at the day hospital

the hollow feeling

the garden outside

before prognosis

Just as a garden receives life-giving water, a patient accepts her essential nourishment. And yet, despite what comfort may be found here—especially those soothing bamboo tones in our mind's ear—we can't escape a subtle tug of the stark reality they might portend.

Kolodji's finesse of alignment throughout *Vital Signs* allows her to juxtapose sobering, even confrontational truth with nuanced calm. She finds moments of forbearance and acceptance in the midst of swirling uncertainty:

low tide

sea star arms wide I sink into sand

an ochre sea star clings

to a rock

The overarching theme of *Vital Signs* primes us to see the poet herself clinging to an anchor of hope, her strength focused on healing despite conditions of scarcity. Contrast this with Kolodji's personified monoku that seems to offer a pivotal moment of assent and release, a tender resting back into some vast sacred source, her labors finally over. It's tempting to call that sacred source the ocean, a prominent subject in Kolodji's haiku over the years. In *Vital Signs*, its importance is palpable:

ebb and flow

hearing loss

of my fear

my daughter's voice

dark ocean

turns into ocean

Is it a stretch to suggest that Kolodji alludes to her own movement toward something much greater than human experience, some sort of (re)union with what might exist beyond the earthly plane? This is a far-reaching inquiry with no clear answer. But, the expression of dissolution of discrete human sense (hearing) and beloved relationship (daughter) in order to embody something infinitely greater might be read not only as Kolodji's contemplation of her own transcendence, but as an invitation for us to ponder our own inevitable journeys of transformation, as well.

Among the many ways *Vital Signs* invites reflection, the collection features a few of Kolodji's poems about the cosmos, an exceptionally fruitful theme in her haiku practice. These imaginative leaps resonate on multiple levels:

wheelchair those Martian rovers

leonid streaks across the sky promises

Delightfully radical here is the empowerment of a wheelchair that defies conditions of limitation to rove the literal frontiers of space exploration and discovery. And while commitments between humans might lag just as comet debris fades from view, we are assured that in the grand scheme of things, there might be a chance for renewal, as the Leonids will surely demonstrate. Weaving work of such adventurous scope into *Vital Signs* is an optimistic gesture, one that counters haiku about diminishment with poems of expansive possibility. It's an act of buoyancy and resilience, qualities that Kolodji herself depended on as she navigated years of illness. It's fitting that these qualities also gave rise to the title of this volume:

the blush of dawn
 through a hospital window
 vital signs

Taking in the fullness of Kolodji's collection brings the haiku master Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) to mind. Shiki also published significant work despite the debilitating encroachment of tuberculosis which took his life at the age of 34. One of Shiki's more direct meditations on his situation is this haiku:

all I can think of
is being sick in bed
and snowbound...

Paired down to bare essentials, snowbound conveys the hefty weight of Shiki's complex truth of his suffering.

Despite their mutually confined views, limited mobilities, and tragic shortage of time, both Shiki and Kolodji offer haiku moments that expand our understanding of the human condition in all its frailty and potential. And, it's important to emphasize the potency of haiku that are anchored in memory as well as present moment experience. Illness is a distinct theme within the broad scope of accomplishment of these two haiku masters. May the fullness of their abundant legacies continue to inspire Haiku practice for generations, perhaps following Kolodji's offering:

eucalyptus scent
another thousand
monarchs

Vital signs, indeed.

**One hopes that the worldwide haiku community will find Kolodji's unique poetic voice and prolific output memorialized in anthologies and collections to come.*