

AN EXPLORATION OF *MONO NO AWARE* IN THE SCIFAIKU OF DEBORAH P KOLODJI

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In 1995, Tom Brinck published the Scifaiku Manifesto on his webpage scifaiku.com. Brinck wasn't the first person to propose science fiction poems based on haiku, but he did codify them and give them a cool name. Since then, there's been a lot of debate about what is or is not a scifaiku. While much of this debate stems from ignorance about what a haiku is or is not, or what's happened with English-language haiku in the second half of the twentieth century, much of the debate also centers on understanding what the potentials of the subgenre are. Therefore, it is important to understand that a scifaiku is a haiku. Brinck says as much in his Manifesto; "Scifaiku is haiku and it is not haiku. It is driven by the inspiration and many of the principles of haiku, but it takes its own direction SciFaiku takes its form from contemporary international haiku ... The topic is science fiction."¹ In short, a scifaiku is a poem in haiku form that takes out the kigo and replaces it with a science fiction idea, image, or topic. While some would argue that this makes the poems senryu, the counter argument is that scifaiku is neither haiku nor senryu, but simply scifaiku. It is a subgenre of haikai literature with its own overlaps and uniqueness, and a subgenre of haikai literature that has great potential.

However, despite having existed for over twenty-five years, scifaiku often receives a bad reputation between the two camps it claims to stride: science fiction poetry and haiku. While the science fiction poetry community has embraced the term, they often eschew traditional haiku poetics in favor of cleverness and jokes. And while the haiku community has embraced the idea of scifaiku, as there have been issues of journals and online features dedicated to the form, the idea that scifaiku is still not "real haiku" or "zappai" lingers in much of the commentary. Again, the idea that the majority of scifaiku do not live up to the standards of English-language haiku due to lack of craft and aesthetic understanding, while not absolute, has much evidence to support it.

If scifaiku is to survive and thrive as a form, it must be rooted in both speculative tradition as well as haiku tradition. To that end, both basic craft techniques from English-language haiku as well as the aesthetics of haiku should be expected when reading scifaiku. This is exactly what Deborah P Kolodji does in her scifaiku chapbook, *Tug of a Black Hole*.² While there are many aesthetic and craft principles at play in this book, it is Kolodji's use of *mono no aware* throughout this collection that allows it to succeed as both haiku and scifaiku.

To understand how *mono no aware* is used in *Tug of a Black Hole*, it is important to understand what *aware* and *mono no aware* mean. *Aware* is an aesthetic based upon heavy emotions, especially love and grief. "According to [Motoori] Norinaga, aware consists of two interjections, *a* and *hare* both of which are used when one's heart is greatly moved ... *Aware*, which combines these two interjections, is primarily a word describing a deeply moved heart, a heart filled with intense emotion."³ *Mono no aware* is a term that has existed in Japan since the Heian period (794–1185) that translates, roughly, to "the pathos of things" or "an empathy towards things." Kazumitsu Kato makes the argument that it is the *mono* that makes this idiom work. "Motoori erred in interpreting *mono* as only an auxiliary, and not as referring to the source of human feeling, in the sense that our perceptions cannot have causes independent of our minds *Aware* is a qualitative term that cannot exist by itself; in other words, *aware* must be applied to something."⁴ The *mono*, the "things" or "objects," are important, and it is these that create the emotional response in readers. Therefore, when looking for *mono no aware*, one would expect an emotional response to the things of this world. That emotional response relates back to *aware*, so an object or thing produces a deep, resonant, profound emotion, usually based on its transience or impermanence. The ability to access these emotions and invoke them in her readers is what makes Kolodji's scifaiku exemplars of the genre.

Kolodji's ability to access *mono no aware* in scifaiku through speculative objects is showcased in this short collection. Her ability to create speculative moments of deep emotional resonance is unparalleled, and *Tug of a Black Hole* contains many poems that carry this resonance. Loss and grief seem to be two of Kolodji's go-to emotions, and when

paralleled with speculative images, the poems can be devastatingly beautiful. Take, for example,

geysers
on Enceladus
our last fight

Using the landscape of one of Saturn’s moons puts us into “speculative” territory. We’re not sure if this is a scientist merely observing images or someone actually living on the moon itself, but the turmoil and regret are palpable in this scifaiku. Kolodji begins with an image, one of turbulent cryovolcanoes on the south pole of the moon. The geysers of Enceladus are famous not only for providing some of the material that creates Saturn’s rings, but also for their chemical make up and violence. NASA scientists have discovered that the composition of the plumes is similar to that of comets. Kolodji is delving into that knowledge, the turbulence and explosiveness of the geysers, to explore emotions and feelings about the fight. The emotional response is found in the juxtaposition of these two images. The turbulence and anger of the geyser is mirrored in the fight, and the grief of the fight still lingers. However, it is important to note that at no point does the reader have any understanding of the fight or any explanation of the emotions involved. Kolodji lets the imagery of a violent, extraterrestrial volcano carry that emotional weight, and lets the emotions there—the violence and fire—inform the reader about the emotions of the fight. This is exactly how *mono no aware* works in this collection; Kolodji allows the images to convey the emotions, which forces the readers to feel them that much more deeply.

In another poem, Kolodji uses the “location/moment” technique often proposed as an alternative to the “fragment/phrase” or similar juxtaposition techniques. This is an excellent technique for scifaiku because it immediately establishes context and science fiction situation, but then illuminates that situation with a moment of emotional shift or poignancy. Kolodji surpasses these expectations by simply providing a location, and then an object, but it’s the resonance between the two that creates the deep feeling of *mono no aware*.

ten years in space
the dish garden
in my cabin

There is absolutely nothing happening in this poem. No action, no verb, simply an object presented to us against a situation. That object is the *mono* that is qualified by the *aware* which creates the emotion. Kolodji achieves this by placing it within the speculative context of a ten-year space journey. Already, this journey is imbued with a sense of isolation and loneliness. The image of the dish garden, which implies cacti, succulents, bonsai, and other low maintenance plants, which would be ideal for the spartan conditions of space travel, especially one of ten-years. It's an image of terran domesticity, something green and alive, against the black emptiness of space and the drudgery of a ten-year mission. When the two parts of this scifaiku are placed next to each other, there is a deep ache for earth and home, one that alternately carries both wistfulness and grief. It is important to note, again, that neither the dish in the cabin nor the observer/speaker of this poem do anything. The object itself is what Kolodji imbues with these resonant emotions, capturing the *mono no aware* is this elegant scifaiku.

While Kolodji creates speculative moments that are of her own imagination and writes them in a such a way that they swell with *mono no aware*, it is the poems that are grounded in authentic moments from life that are the best examples of *mono no aware* in this book. This collection begins with a striking poem of human frailty, one that with expert minimalism establishes the tone and themes of the entire collection. The titular poem,

the tug
of a black hole
this isolation

is one that takes one of the most impressive cosmic events and juxtaposes it against a body's emotional impermanence. Immediately readers are thrown into a sense of *mono no aware*. Kolodji sets readers up with an

image, a “thing” or “object,” a black hole, but then invokes neither a fear nor terror of the black hole, but instead a beautiful yearning. There is an ache here, one akin to grief; the tug is not something to fear, but something that, compared with the isolation, seems almost like relief. Kolodji finds beauty through her body’s frailty and impermanence, themes which are carried through the rest of the collection.

Many would argue it’s not enough to simply find beauty in an image of impermanence. However, as Donald Keene argues, “The Japanese were perhaps the first to discover the special pleasure of impermanence, and [Yoshida] Kenko especially believed that impermanence was a necessary element in beauty The frailty of human existence, a common theme in the literature of the world, has probably not been recognized elsewhere than in Japan as a necessary condition of beauty.”⁵ This is where Kolodji’s poetry excels, and fully propels scifaiku into the aesthetic of *mono no aware*. Kolodji deals directly with her own cancer and personal loss with the scifaiku

my hair loss
 Saturn losing
 its rings

Kolodji takes one of the most devastating physical consequences of cancer, the hair loss of chemotherapy, and while mourning, also finds a triumphant beauty in it. Juxtaposing the hair loss to the gradual loss of Saturn’s rings due to incoming micrometeorites and solar radiation, Kolodji creates a rich resonance thick with *mono no aware*. There is a beauty found in the hair loss, one of not simply acceptance, but planetary greatness. While the loss is painful, iconically so, it is also beautiful. The loss of both human hair and planetary rings, when juxtaposed, echo a beauty created by the loss; the loss is necessary for the juxtaposition to work, and thus is necessary for the aesthetic beauty of the poem. By drawing a parallel between herself and a planet, Kolodji finds a gentle poignancy that resonates through the loss into a place of acceptance. This is scifaiku at its most powerful, paralleling the painfully human with the galactically magnificent, finding a rich and resonant beauty in both.

Scifaiku is not going to disappear as a literary subgenre. There are journals dedicated to it and similar speculative haikai forms, and there have been essays, presentations, books, and studies dedicated to the topic. After over twenty-five years of existence, it is important to look at exemplars of the form to understand how it can succeed, grow, and evolve as a form. One such exemplar is Deborah P Kolodji, whose scifaiku chapbook *Tug of a Blackhole* is a testament to the potentials of scifaiku both completely imagined as well as grounded in personal reality. Where Kolodji's craft excels, especially in this collection, is in the aesthetic of *mono no aware*, wherein things or objects invoke and create an emotional response. Ideally, Kolodji's scifaiku, as well as the work of other scifaiku poets, will be studied further, both for *mono no aware* but also for other haiku aesthetics. It is hoped that the two communities which scifaiku bridges—English-language haiku and speculative poetry—will fuel this study from their relative fields, advancing scifaiku technique, craftsmanship, and composition.

NOTES

¹ Brinck, Tom. "The SciFaiku Manifesto." <http://scifaiku.com/what/>. Accessed August 11, 2023.

² Kolodji, Deborah P. *Tug of a Black Hole*. Cleveland, Ohio: Title IX Press, 2021.

³ Makoto Ueda. "Shintoism and the Theory of Literature," in his *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1967.

⁴ Kato, Kazumitsu. "Some notes on Mono no Aware" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 82, No. 4 (Oct.–Dec., 1962).

⁵ Keene, Donald. "Japanese Aesthetics" in Hume, Nancy G., ed. *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.