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Global Haiku

SciFaiku: Tom Brinck Reader Response

Haiku has been a tradition of Japanese culture for centuries and has continually inspired the poetry community all over the globe, including in the science fiction community. Tom Brinck was the pioneer of the science fiction haiku movement with his publication of *The SciFaiku Manifesto* in 1995, which distinguished his haiku from Japanese traditions. He wrote a declaration of principles highlighting immediacy, minimalism, science fiction, and human insight to help guide science fiction writers with the process. The purpose of science fiction haiku, also known as SciFaiku, SciFi-Ku, or scifiku, is to concisely and clearly discuss science fiction topics in a minimalistic way. Similar to traditional haiku, SciFaiku aims to describe a single moment in a direct way, without the overuse of metaphors or abstract ideas. One important distinction between the two is the idea of using seasons to evoke direction. SciFaiku uses science-based words to express a concept, while more traditional haiku has a strong emphasis on elements of nature, seasons, and weather. This type of emphasis on the mechanics of nature can be observed in Tom Brinck's SciFaiku, which has a strong focus on naturally occurring events in modern life, but with a sci-fi twist.

brushing dirt
from the tea bush root,
exposing ancient steel

Tom Brinck, 2003

This haiku was the first one to draw my eye towards Tom Brinck's style of taking natural human experiences and adding a, sometimes, unexpected twist using science-based language. There is a distinct contrast between the action of brushing the dirt from a seemingly normal tree root, only to find cold hard metal under the surface. His use of present tense verbs puts the reader within the story and allows them to fill the haiku with their perceptions. At no point can the reader be in a passive state while reading this poem. Throughout the rest of Brinck's haiku, the same type of style is seen, so this simplistic use of science fiction jargon is the perfect transition away from people's traditional thoughts about haiku.

carrion birds scatter
with each twitch
of reanimated flesh

Tom Brinck, 2006

Compared to the haiku above, there are quite a few similarities in Brinck's work with the significance of this poem. Again, he describes an ordinary carrion bird going about its business, but then we come to find out that the bird has been resurrected and no longer resembles its original state. The direction of the haiku is then completely reversed once the reader understands this unexpected twist because it drastically changes the meaning of the first two lines. The carrion bird is no longer a part of the natural order, and his reanimated body, unable to assemble some sort of control, is inexplicably twitching and writhing on the ground. I like the direction he takes these superficially traditional haiku's, and it seems that Brinck's goal is to pervert our idea of the natural order. However, he manages to do this in a very straightforward way by integrating our preconceived notion of what a haiku should be with easy to understand futuristic references.

entrance to waste processing,
kitten prints
glowing green

Tom Brinck, 2001

I was particularly fond of this haiku when I first read it because of how open to interpretation Brinck leaves it. For all we know the kitten could be a mutated monster that fell into the waste processing center and emerged with glowing eyes, a disproportionate body size, and an altered behavioral mindset bent on causing destruction and terror. Or, the kitten could be a frequent cute, and harmless visitor that traverses the otherwise abandoned paths whenever they feel like. There is not a specific way that the reader is supposed to come to understand this haiku, other than through their own insight. Similar to the other two haiku, I got a sense of normalcy knowing the focal point was a kitten that was featured within a chaotic or startling scene.

Many other haiku by Tom Brinck have an underlying message of forbidding circumstances. They speak on devastations that we could not begin to understand in our modern times, but that we can still fear for the future. Brinck still incorporates comparisons between the lines that help to bind our world with that of the science fiction genre, but in a way that leaves the reader shivering at the prospect of what could be.

ramship prostitute
again spitting the copper taste
from her mouth

Tom Brinck, 1998

This was a haiku that really took me back for a second. Not because of the context, because this is a reality that many people face, but because of the visceral emotions I experienced when thinking about the logistics of a prostitute giving sexual favors to a robot. I interpreted the copper taste as coming from a robotic man, which left me with more questions than answers when it came to what type of world it is where a human (or a robot) prostitute would be participating in fallacious acts with a robot. Whatever the sexual preferences of these beings are, only adds to the humanity woven throughout. The reaction of the woman and the use of the common word prostitute to describe her gives the situation realness that helps the reader, at the very least, have compassion and a sense of understanding for the woman's circumstances.

Lunar New Year
again the fear of laser attack

Tom Brinck, 1997

The sentiment of this haiku alludes to a future that is entirely too realistic in the current state of our world. There is an overall sense that whatever world war occurred was a product of incessant and impending doom brought on by national conflicts. I interpreted it as a potential reality for our world, especially because of the ode to the Lunar New Year. Although it is a pessimistic outlook, I could not help but feel like we cannot escape the chaos perpetuated by the aging forms of the universe. And yet again, Brinck makes human concepts that much more perceived through the dramatization of the everyday occurrences in our life by blending them with the biological causes of inhumanity and disaster.

thin air twilight
mildew remains the one sign
that humans came to a lifeless planet

Tom Brinck, 1994-1995

Although this haiku does not have a clear objective towards human anguish, I interpreted this as a poem of failure and loneliness. Humans have been dreaming of making contact with life forms on other planets since we were able to understand that our planet was not the only one out there. I imagined the media parade that would ensue after the first mention about potential life on a planet within reach. But, the hope (and fear) of what would come after this discovery was once again extinguished after finding only dark skies and patches of mildew. This haiku hinted at a common anticipation for the beyond officially being concluded by a few patches of bacteria. While there was not much emphasis on technological advancement or frightening futuristic science fiction scenarios, this haiku was still representative of Brinck's use of human concepts set in a distant future to speak on melancholy happenings.

Even though there are countless wonderfully poetic SciFaiku that Brinck writes about the troubles of the future, I would be remised not to mention some of the haiku that deal with more encouraging topics. Many of his haiku describe mundane situations that we can all relate to in some way, but with some sentiment to an otherworldly experience. As with the bleaker haiku, Brinck continues to use words and phrases from the common world to intertwine the vastly differing ideas.

hover-kayak:
dragonflies
in the slipstream

Tom Brinck, 2001

I thought this haiku perfectly encapsulated a side of Brinck's poetry that had more of a traditional focus. He centered the theme entirely on the perception of nature from the one element of sci-fi, the hover-kayak. From a reader's perspective, I easily traveled to the point of view of the kayaker. I pictured the body of the boat floating inches above the surface of the stream, sensing the naturally occurring waves and responding in turn. As the kayaker looks around, dragonflies swoop under the kayak and spin out the other side in a dramatic flair. This is a very whimsical haiku, uncharacteristic of the haiku presented earlier, but that goes to show the duality of Brinck's and how he is able to capture any circumstance in a vivid and engaging in just three lines.

Florida beach
a minibus stops
at an atomic rocket coffee shop

Tom Brinck, 1999

This was another haiku that gave off the most tranquil and immaculate vibes. I loved to imagine myself stepping off some futuristically done up minibus to see the wondrous and infinite ocean to the left of me and a steak and shake style gravitating rocket coffee shop to the right. Initially, this haiku reminded me of a scene from *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams where there is a whole mini-book dedicated to the restaurant at the end of the universe. Although in the haiku the coffee shop is not at the edges of existence, there was a similar feeling of mystery and excitement that I got when comparing both situations.

This haiku is also very similar to the one above it. Both seemed to step away from the fantastical side of science fiction to spotlight ordinary events that are easier for the reader to comprehend. If I had not known the context of the author's work, I would have thought this haiku to simply be about a local rocket themed coffee shop in the touristy part of a Florida city. But that is not the case for the last haiku that I wanted to highlight.

Low thunder...his wife
whispers hypnotic commands
to his dreaming id

Tom Brinck, 1997

I chose to end my comparison of Brinck's haiku with this particular one because I believe it encompasses all of the principles, he laid out in his manifesto of SciFaiku. From his beautiful words capable of transporting me into the poem to his wonderful use of science fiction jargon, and to his stunning ability to create a complex story in three lines, this haiku is one that will stay on my mind for a while. The idea that a wife would possess the ability to talk directly to her husband's dreaming id is mind-blowing and considering that the id is what attempts to satisfy a person's subconscious there is an element of comedy. The wife seems to be trying to hypnotize her husband into altering his id desires to better suit her own, and I find that to be a fascinating idea for a haiku. With his mention of the weather and the use of the word's hypnotic commands, this haiku comes to life. And again, Brinck takes our basic knowledge of Freud's concept of the id and transposes it into something straight out of a science fiction novel.

Science fiction is a genre that allows us to step out of our known world and travel to one's beyond our imagination, and SciFaiku is not an exception from this. The imagination needed to come up with original and engaging science fiction in the boundaries of three lines is something that Tom Brinck excels at. He creates the most realistically implausible scenarios that are either centered around the most mundane or the most apocalyptic, incomprehensible experiences. There is nothing normal about the haiku that Brinck produces, but then again who wants to go through life only knowing the normal world?

Works Cited

Brinck, Tom. "SciFaiku." SciFaiku, (1994-2006): Web. 3 November 2020.