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Fading Light: Appreciation of Firefly Haiku

As I have been reading haiku throughout this semester, I have noticed a lot of authors writing about fireflies in their poems. This caught my interest not only because the insect was brought up repeatedly across generations of authors, but also because of how the firefly imagery was used in a different context for each haiku. I enjoy picturing the firefly haiku because each one comes with such a different meaning, and reading up quickly on the meaning of fireflies taught me that in Japan, fireflies are a symbol for both love and war. They are both a sign of summer and passionate love while also representing the spirits of soldiers who have died in war (Kyoto Journal). This duality was especially interesting to me because it is so conflicting and likens well to the juxtaposition that we see in haiku as a whole. One of the first haiku I read brought this juxtaposition to light very well in relation to fireflies.

briefly her eyes unglue from the iPhone fireflies

Carl Seguiban, *Mayfly* 57, 3

I think this haiku does an excellent job of illustrating the juxtaposition that comes with haiku. In our technologically advanced world, we have almost everything right at our fingertips. We can talk to friends, scroll through celebrities' posts on social media, check our emails, read the news, and do an endless number of other tasks on our phones at any given time of the day. It's the easiest distraction there is. I especially like the image that is presented with the entire haiku being on one line. It brings the fluidness of scrolling on a phone screen to the way I read the haiku, making me picture a girl scrolling through her phone, and as she scrolls up to the next post, her eyes follow the motion of her finger and catch a glimpse of a firefly in the darkness for just a second before she turns back to her device. The use of the word "briefly" combined with the image of fireflies also adds to the haiku—fireflies are just a flash in the darkness, blinking on only to blink out again, and there's ever only a glimpse of them in the darkness. It continues along the image of technology, short attention spans, and the ephemeral nature of life, but brings that world into the serenity of nature.

illuminating
 the silence between us . . .
 firefly

Swist, *TSBU*, 103

Swist also does a wonderful job of bringing his haiku into the serenity of nature. This haiku, of which the second line ended up becoming the title of his collection, takes a relationship and brings it into a calmer space. This is one firefly haiku where I see the bluer tones of the firefly's light instead of the greenish yellow that I am accustomed to because of the calmness that is brought to the poem with the use of the ellipses in the second line. The firefly in this haiku represents, to me, a breath, or a moment of comfortable silence instead of a source of distraction or excitement. I pictured two people sitting on a porch late at night talking about life and other deep topics, and the silences that fall naturally into the conversation are comfortable, not awkward. The firefly lights up one of those silences, giving the pair

something to stare at and catch and fill the time with, and it brings them deeper into the calmness of that silence. While the appearance of the firefly is rather sudden in the third line, it is not unwelcome, just a gentle surprise in the darkness of nature.

grave fireflies
we talk about souls
trapped inside a body

Binny Tamang, *Kukai 6*, Fall 2020

This firefly haiku brings a much darker, contrasting tone to the image of fireflies. I imagined two people walking through a graveyard late at night, reading the names on the headstones by the light of the fireflies, and talking about the fireflies as departed souls of the bodies buried under their feet. This brings to mind the image of fireflies as spirits of those who have died, though not necessarily in war as the Japanese beliefs think. The image of “grave fireflies” brings to mind the meaning of “grave” as serious and solemn, but also as a grave where a person would be buried, so the colors I saw here were more eerie yellows and greens than a calming blue. As the poem progresses, those colors get even darker as the second and third lines mention “souls trapped,” an image that brings the sadness of death and the concept of a possible afterlife into the gentle lights that come with fireflies. In that respect, this is a haiku that also brings the opposition of light and dark into play even from the first line: “grave fireflies.” Something dark and depressing with something that gives off a soft light.

more darkness
more fireflies—
more darkness than fireflies

Gary Hotham, *BM*, 22

This haiku is one that is very straightforward in the juxtaposition of darkness and light; however, it presents an image that is not often thought about. When thinking about fireflies or seeing them blinking in the air as you walk through a park late at night, you point out their light, but you don’t recognize that the firefly is only a tiny dot of light in the middle of the vast expanse of darkness that is the sky. This haiku does realize that in the final line, saying that there is “more darkness than fireflies,” recognizing that the fireflies are tiny in comparison to the darkness outside at night. I also liked the rollercoaster of emotion that came with reading this haiku. It begins with darkness, then dots in the tiny lights of fireflies, only to pause again before reacknowledging the darkness and recognizing that it outnumbers the fireflies significantly. I love how the haiku starts out with a darker, more negative emotion, goes into the happier tone that comes with fireflies, and then turns back to the darkness in the final line.

Seen in plain daylight
the firefly’s nothing but
an insect

Basho, *Intro to Japanese Haiku*, 3

This is another haiku that lends a darker tone to fireflies. I liked this haiku because I realized that I do think that fireflies are almost magical in the dark with their glowing lights, but when I see them in daylight, I sometimes don’t recognize them right away and freak out when I see that a bug is crawling on

me. Basho yanks us back to reality with the use of “plain” and “nothing but,” taking us out of the magical world that sparkling lights transport us to. This haiku is very different from the previous ones I have talked about because it doesn’t have a magical or peaceful take on a firefly’s light but sees it only for what it actually is: an insect. This haiku is simple yet profound in that observation because it gives us a normally magically infused image in a very plain context.

as far as the light goes
my daughter goes
after the firefly

Gary Hotham, *BM*, 39

lights out
. . . the firefly
inside

Peggy Lyles, *THTR*, 108

I initially matched these two haiku together because of the images they painted when I read them. Hotham’s haiku made me picture a young girl running across the yard while the rest of her family sits around talking. Her movements are very staggered, stopping and starting because she sees the light of the bug and then doesn’t. Lyles’ haiku gave me a similar picture of a family sitting in the darkness that results from a power outage, and they see the light of a firefly in the darkness. They, like the little girl, have to wait to see the flash of light again in order to catch the firefly, and there is a certain silence that comes with that waiting.

After pairing these haiku together, I also noticed that they had a connected feel to them, with the firefly as the connection point. In Hotham’s haiku, light is mentioned in the first line, and with light comes darkness. When the firefly is brought into the last line, Hotham brings that sense of darkness into the light he has already mentioned in his poem because the glow of fireflies can only be seen in darkness. Conversely, Lyles begins with darkness and uses the firefly to bring light into the picture as the firefly blinks in the room.

in the shadows of the trees
by the amusement park
a firefly

Alan Pizzarelli, *THA*, 153

When I first read this haiku, it presented an innocent image of a bustling amusement park in the middle of summer. Kids and teenagers don’t have to worry about schoolwork, and they have free time to spend with their friends. When thinking about the meaning of fireflies as specified by Japanese legend, however, there was a different picture painted for me. At an amusement park, there would be numerous flashing lights—all the rides, the game booths, the lights strung between poles. Why would the firefly’s singular blink be the one that is the most noticeable? The first line is a very large juxtaposition compared to the amusement park image, “shadows of the trees,” so a firefly’s light would be noticeable there. The two images in those lines made me picture the passionate love of a teenage

couple making out. This is a very different take compared to most firefly haiku that deal with passionate love, but it is quite unique.

love fulfilled . . .
fireflies leisurely await
the sunrise

Masajo Suzuki, *LH*, 89

Suzuki, in her haiku, does an exquisite job of painting images of passion, forbidden love, and other topics that are often considered taboo. The first line made me picture two lovers after a sexual encounter, perhaps after a one-night stand. It was passionate, yes, but they are able to “leisurely” await the sunrise instead of rushing away from each other or having a large sense of guilt, and the ellipses shows the breath that are able to take. That description brings in a sense of slowness that comes with fireflies. Although their light blinks and fades and blinks and fades, it is a slow and deliberate blink rather than a rapid flash of light. It stays in the corners of your vision even after they blink out, and Suzuki takes that image to its fullest in this haiku. Additionally, the fact that the fireflies are waiting for sunrise shows a lack of fear that Suzuki presents in many of her haiku. The sunrise does not scare them even though it is much brighter than their small light, and I think that is because they are confident and content in their passion for one another.

this summer night—
she lets the firefly glow
through the cage of her fingers

Gary Hotham, *BM*, 81

firefly in a cage—
clandestine letters
come no more

Masajo Suzuki, *LH*, 68

In Hotham’s haiku, I enjoyed the spontaneity and freedom that the poem presented as a whole. Summer is a time that I associate with minimal responsibilities, lots of time outdoors, and long daylight hours, so the image of catching fireflies and watching them glow gave me a very peaceful feeling, and I saw more colors in shades of a green firefly. Suzuki’s haiku gave me a very different feeling of being trapped and confined with a restrictive set of expectations, and I saw more of a red glow when picturing the haiku, like that of a fire or forbidden love—a scarlet letter.

I paired these haiku because I liked that each of them dealt with cages in different ways. Hotham’s description of it as “the cage of her fingers” makes the cage seem temporary and unrestrictive. While it is a cage for the bug, it is not a bad cage, nor is it a permanent one. The fact that the girl in the poem “lets the firefly glow” although it is caged suggests that passion and love are glowing from her even though she is still trapping herself somehow. However, in Suzuki’s mention of “clandestine letters” makes the cage brought up in the first line into a real, serious cage. Something has gone wrong, letters proving evidence of an affair have been found, and that passionate love has been snatched away because it is not allowed to be there. I enjoyed the similar yet different feelings these haiku presented.

shall we die together?
 he whispers in my ear . . .
 fireflies at dusk

Masajo Suzuki, *LH*, 88

This is another haiku that brings together the passionate love and the departed souls that fireflies represent, but it does it in a lighter way than some of the other haiku I have written about. In this haiku, the idea of death is paired closely with the idea of love when the mention of dying together is whispered by the second person. That close pairing creates a connection that comes across as serene and complete rather than a comment that seems to fear death. The two people are happy together and passionate about each other, and they intend to spend the rest of their lives together until death do them part, as is commonly promised in wedding vows. Death, to them, is not a scary concept, but a place where they will be able to spend the remainder of their lives with each other happily. I see both reds and blues here, but they are peaceful and warm rather than cold and scary.

fireflies
 beyond
 the sarcasm

John Stevenson, *HTASP*, 24

When reading Stevenson's haiku, I pictured to people who are best friends. They're impressively sarcastic with each other, exchange constant banter with playful insults that don't mean anything on a deeper level, and their other friends don't understand their relationship at all. They don't completely realize it, but I think they are deeply in love with each other. The fireflies showed me that sparkling love, the kind where you can look at the other person and see something wonderful that you desperately want even as they insult you and you think that it will never be anything more than a really good friendship. With only one or two words on each line of the haiku, it makes it easier to slow down and take in the moment and exist in it for a while instead of rushing through it. Love is usually a slow realization, and this haiku lends itself perfectly to that.

When looking at different firefly haiku, I always enjoy the contexts that the firefly is brought into. The authors don't simply leave it to live in nature, but they see it and bring it into our regular lives. Sometimes that context is more magical and in our imaginations, but oftentimes, as I have realized through reading all of these haiku, it is more natural than we realize.

I noticed fireflies prior to reading these haiku, but I mostly saw them as cool insects that were able to flow. Fireflies are an insect, and all of these authors recognize that, but they make something so ordinary and everyday into something that represents these large concepts of love and death. I admire how something so small and ordinary can become something so meaningful, and throughout reading these haiku, I have begun to think about them in a different light. I am very much looking forward to summer next year.

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