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Complicatedly Uncomplicated: A Closer Look at the Haiku of Chase Gagnon

In Chase Gagnon's haiku, the juxtaposition of whimsy and trauma create an emotional response within the reader and calls the reader to consider the duality of seemingly simple moments in life.

morphine drip...
I sing my mother
a lullaby

Chase Gagnon, *Prune Juice*

This haiku introduces a common rhetorical strategy within Chase's writing, the usage of ellipsis. The usage of ellipsis is interesting from a rhetorical standpoint because it extends the length of that line. The image of a morphine drip hangs in the air for longer because the ellipsis feels like the idea is slowly trailing off. It's as if, when Chase sat down to write this haiku, he was looking out into the distance, imagining this distant memory that he once experienced. This is interesting because morphine drips are usually connected to pain, and pain is not something you want to hold onto, extend, or think about for too long. Maybe the pain that the morphine is trying to fix is lingering just like the line itself lingers and hangs in the air.

The potency of the pain is only intensified when the second line says that it is his mother. The usage of parents in poetry is common and tends to evoke emotion from the reader, because people tend to have a strong attachment to their mothers. I know, for me, my mother is my everything and so much of me is within her. All of a sudden for me and readers like me, the pain is attached to someone and it is someone that he obviously cares about.

The parent child role reversal also pulls at the heart strings of the readers. In a traditional sense, the mother sings a lullaby to her child. You think of a mother waking up to the sound of her crying baby and going into their room to comfort them. You see the mother picking that baby up and holding them in her arms as she rocks back and forth in a rocking chair singing softly and sweetly the tune of "You Are My Sunshine." In this case, however, the child sings a lullaby to their mother. The image is harrowing because your brain draws an image much less beautiful and pure like the image of the mother holding the child. This is an act of desperation and of pain. The fragile nature of this moment is a work in vulnerability because the mother cannot serve the traditional role in this story. The whimsy tone that the singing of a lullaby juxtaposed next to the pain associated with morphine and the role reversal is a prime example of taking a simple action or moment in time and exposing the many layers of the moment.

her ashes
settle into the pond
starry night

Chase Gagnon, *North Carolina Haiku Society Anthology*

This haiku stood out to me as a great next haiku to analyze because it feels like a compliment to the previous haiku from *Prune Juice*. When I read this haiku, I could not help but assume that the "her" in it was his mother due to the pain referenced in the previous one.

Unlike the last haiku about his mother, this haiku utilizes zero punctuation. Because Chase uses punctuation often, it feels relevant to recognize the fact that he has not put any of it in this haiku. I think that speaks to the gravity of what he is writing about. Someone has died, and for the sake of this analysis, it is safe to assume that the person that died is his mother. Dealing with the death of anyone in your close circle is hard,

but losing your parent is something that I cannot fathom. I have been told that the pain you feel is not constrained to your chest, your heart, your body, or your brain. This pain is in everything. This pain is everywhere. This trauma is deep seeded and resonates throughout the poem and hits the reader hard where it hurts.

Despite this all-encompassing pain, the haiku's third line says, "starry night." When I read this line, I immediately thought of a specific painting that I have loved for a really long time. This may be an intentional allusion to the Vincent Van Gogh painting "Starry Night Over the Rhone."



This painting captures the essence of the haiku, I think. First and foremost, there's the simple connection to the haiku the presence of a body of water. The people in the painting are turning away and walking from the water with a drawn in body language indicating some sort of sadness, pain, or discomfort. But more importantly, there is a beautiful starry night taking over the sky. The comparison of the pain right next to the beauty of a starry night is yet another example of the lack of simplicity in life's toughest moments—the moments that Chase likes to write about most.

busted knuckles...
my father's blood mixing
with mine

Chase Gagnon, *A New Resonance* 10, 79

Another common theme in Chase Gagnon's haiku is his relationship with his parents. This haiku is the first haiku we are seeing about his father. After reading the haiku, it makes it easy for the reader to make assumptions about the relationship between Gagnon and his father.

Obviously, there is a deeper story behind this haiku. Why was there punching? Who threw the first punch? What was happening before the punch? Where was the blood mixing—on their knuckles, on their faces, or on the floor? The answer to any of these questions cannot be concretely determined unless you were there, but I think it is safe to say that there was a major disagreement beyond the two that led to this.

This haiku also utilizes the ellipsis like other Gagnon poetry. Much like the previous usage, this ellipsis is used to draw out the first line that says "busted knuckles." However, I think the reasoning for this haiku is different than last time. Before, the ellipsis helped with the whimsy in the haiku, whereas this usage is used as a way to make it more of the present moment. When someone has bloody knuckles, there is usually a lot that leads up to that. Maybe this exact moment was after a fist fight and they are taking a second to absorb

what had just happened to that. The whimsy is not your typical whimsy in this poem, rather it manifests itself as a “what have I just done?” kind of whimsy.

dad’s suicide
a candle burns away
its shadow

Chase Gagnon, *A Hundred Gourds*

This serves as a solid pair with the previous poem also about Chase’s father. It almost feels like a conclusion to it.

The blanket that lays upon this poem is the gravity and weight from the words “dad’s suicide.” Often times, people, including artistic types, are afraid to come out and say the actual word suicide because it can be triggering and because the idea of taking your life is still stigmatized in our society today. Chase, however, is not afraid of saying anything in his poetry. That is what first drew me in on his poetry in the first place—it reminded me to heavily of the poetry of the classic Charles Bukowski: brash, unflinching, and raw.

Indeed, Chase’s poetry can be brash, unflinching, and raw. A specific Gagnon haiku that reminds me of this idea takes a very hard to talk about topic and puts it on display.

self-inflicted scars
I slide my lips
across the harmonica

Chase Gagnon, *A New Resonance 10, 83*

This haiku is another example of the complication of a seemingly simple moment in time. There is a beautiful whimsy in the act of playing the harmonica. Often seen in times of relaxation and peace, harmonica playing carries with it a connotation of serenity. This is manipulated by Gagnon by placing it right next to an image of pain and shame. He uses three words that make people uncomfortable and cause them to squirm. For people that have a deeper connection to the haiku, this text could carry within it a large weight that will cause a heart shaped stone to sit on their chest.

Self-inflicted scars hold within it a world of a story. There is never one answer as to why someone feels like they must do this. It is not my place to predict why someone may be struggling with it, and I can only hope that they get the help that they need. This being said, I do not believe that the point of the haiku is drawing attention to the hurt that went into choosing to do this; I believe that this haiku is all about resiliency and moving forward after a trauma.

If we return to the idea that the harmonica is a symbol of peace and serenity, then it is a possibility that this haiku is actually about the beauty that could come out of the ugliness. Maybe those scars have been long healed, and they are merely a backdrop to the now peaceful life of the narrator that is now playing the harmonica. I choose to believe this, because I do not prefer the world in which haikus about this are all sad.

goosebumps...
your breath, a memory
on my skin

Chase Gagnon, *Hedgerow 6*

This haiku serves as a great contrast to the previous couple that we have looked at from Chase Gagnon. With that being said, it still has the same root in complicating uncomplicated situations. At its core, you

cannot tell if it is a happy or a sad haiku, and that is the beauty of it. I have always loved that about haiku—the fact that you get to dictate so much of the nature of the haiku. Yes, Gagnon probably had an idea as he wrote it, but now I am in complete control of the haiku as this is my experience. When you read it, you get to have complete control of the haiku.

This haiku is interesting because it has a unique set of punctuation we have not yet seen from Gagnon. In past haikus, he has utilized the ellipses, but this is the first time we have seen a comma, especially in the middle of a phrase. The ellipsis in the first line does what it does in the other poems: it drags out that first line and emphasizes the word in that slot. In this context, goosebumps are the main object in this haiku. Also, we have all felt the experience of having goosebumps before, and the ellipsis was probably inserted in order to allow time for the readers to imagine the prickles that come with getting goosebumps.

I was extremely intrigued by the extra comma in the second line of this haiku because it surprises me immensely. I am sure Gagnon put the comma in the middle of the second line in order to draw attention towards the breath and focusing less on goosebumps, memories, or skin.

After processing the syntactical approaches to this haiku, I am simply intrigued by the storyline behind this haiku. I am uncertain if I should be feeling pain or whimsy. Because of this, I am uncertain if I should be loving or hating the haiku. For this poem, the complexity lays not in the syntactical evidence, but the conflicting views of how this haiku should be read.

Gagnon's haiku is unique, insightful, brash, raw, vulnerable, angry, sweet, and everything in-between. What Chase Gagnon does best, in my opinion, is causing the reader to feel something and question the simplicity in everyday life. Instead of looking at something and assuming that it is as simple as right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, stupid or intelligent, and so forth is to do an injustice not only to the world around us, but also to the world you and your closest circle is living in. I think Gagnon, more than anything, serves as a reminder of the fact that there is a life to live beyond the walls and confines of whatever your situation has turned into.

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