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Dr. Brooks
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Contemporary Haiku Reader Response Essay

Sipping on Prune Juice: Musings over Senryu

by Bryn Sentnor

The first several contemporary haiku that I ever read had a heavy nature element – poems that in three lines were able to paint the most vivid of pictures that played to each and every one of my senses. I could see the bright colors and hear the symphony of sounds; I could feel the sun, the wind, the rain, the hot sand, and the ocean on my skin, and I could smell and taste specific aromas. They were beautiful.

I didn't know that a haiku could be more than that until I read *Almost Unseen*, a collection of haiku written by George Swede. His haiku felt more 'real,' for lack of a better word. While the nature haiku are lovely, I feel as if they're sort of removed from our plane of existence, like the haiku is capturing some beautiful natural phenomenon that isn't attainable. Swede's haiku are much more relatable and down to earth because they touch on human experiences. Many of his haiku deal with very real topics, including bullying, loneliness, sex, abortion, drug abuse, anxiety, mental illness, divorce, and even death. In a phrase used by Dr. Brooks, Swede perfectly encapsulates the angst of being human.

What I did not know at the time was that these poems are called *senryu*, and they often gently poke fun at people and society while shining light on some of the tougher parts of life – the moments that cause us anxiety, frustration, anger, sadness, grief, and many more real, human emotions. Many of the *senryu* I've read have used puns, wordplay, and irony in this gentle mockery of our everyday struggles as people. Here are a few from the magazine *Prune Juice: Celebrating 10 Years: 2000-2019* whose usage of wordplay or irony I particularly liked:

barely Tuesday
the cookie curse jar
full of dough

Terri L. French, *Prune Juice*, pg. 31

I thought the use of pun and wordplay in this *senryu* was very clever and gave it several different layers of meaning. The words 'cookie,' 'jar,' and 'dough' make you think of an actual cookie jar with cookies in it. However, throwing one single word into the commonly used phrase 'cookie jar' and making it 'cookie curse jar' changes the meaning entirely. Personally, I think of a household that makes you put money into an empty glass jar every time you swear, which in turn would change the meaning of 'dough' from dough that you use to bake stuff to a slang term for money. Overall, the *senryu* is very well written. I'm astounded by the intellect, wit, and creativity.

think outside the box —
on the wall
of his cubicle

Ian Willey, *Prune Juice*, pg. 86

The irony in this senryu does a great job capturing the struggle that so many working adults have to deal with on a daily basis. Especially as kids, we're all encouraged to be creative, follow our dreams, have big ideas, and 'think outside the box,' but the reality is that a lot of work environments are not unlike this one: employees wind up trapped behind a desk in a cubicle, stifling their creative juices and struggling to come up with a good idea. And now, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of our classes are online, so we may not be trapped in a literal cubicle, but often times it feels like we're trapped in a metaphorical cubicle, sitting at our tables, desks, and kitchen counters all day, attending class from behind a computer screen.

Here's something to think about: if senryu are supposed to capture the everyday struggles in our mundane human lives, then why are some of them so damn funny? There's a thin line between what we find tragic and what we find comedic, and part of it has to do with a presence or lack of aesthetic detachment. Basically, we need to feel superior and safe compared to the speakers of the senryu; otherwise, we will identify with the speakers and feel their pain. Once that sense of detachment is present in a senryu, then the famous phrase "tragedy is what happens to *me*; comedy is what happens to *you*" can apply. There are several ways to achieve this comedic detachment, but what I've noticed is that most senryu use what we call incongruity. A general rule of thumb to consider when writing haiku is that there should be two concepts or images that juxtapose each other in some way. Incongruity specifically refers to juxtaposing things that don't normally go together. An example of this in theatre would be the scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde where Gwendolen and Cecily are having tea together. They have turned something often thought of as very prim and proper into something ridiculous by using sugar cubes and cake as weapons. The following senryu clearly have the same sense of juxtaposing two concepts that just don't fit together:

plucking hair
from my ears
she loves me, she loves me not

Curtis Dunlap, *Prune Juice*, pg. 19

Now, normally, the whole "she loves me, she loves me not" thing is supposed to be done with a flower, and you pluck the petals off the flower, alternating between saying "(s)he loves me" and "(s)he loves me not," and whatever you say as you pluck the last petal off is supposed to be true. This makes sense, because flowers are often associated with romance and used as a romantic gesture. On the other hand, plucking your ear hair is gross and disgusting, and is the last thing one would associate with romance, but because the plucking action is present in both scenarios, it's a juxtaposition that works. By pairing these two images that would never in a million years be associated with each other, Dunlap creates that sense of aesthetic detachment that you find in comedy, making this another senryu that left me on the floor laughing.

all excuses spent
I tell my wife about
my alien abduction

Alan Pizzarelli, *Prune Juice*, pg. 15

I can imagine the relationship and the scenario: the husband has gotten out of so many dinner parties, brunches, family gatherings, whatever his wife wants to do that he has no interest in whatsoever, that he's already used every believable excuse in the book. But he still needs a fresh one, so he resorts to something that may be a little less believable... or a lot less believable. In this senryu, the juxtaposition is between the incredibly relatable situation and the incredibly ridiculous excuse that does a great job of catching the reader off guard/throwing them for a loop.

juggling piranha
in a tsunami —
shampooing the cat

Tim Graves, *Prune Juice*, pg. 39

I thought that the incongruity in this senryu served multiple purposes: not only does it provide a sense of detachment, but it also paints an incredibly vivid and hilarious image! I can see this poor person leaning over the bathtub trying to give his cat a bath, and there's sudsy water splashing everywhere and meowing and hissing and the cat is just. not. having it. The other thing I loved about this juxtaposition was how hyperbolic it is. Piranhas and tsunamis are both terrifying things because of their potential for death and destruction. While shampooing the cat may be an everyday task, pairing it with the first two lines of the senryu give it an entirely different connotation. This might be one of the best haiku I've seen so far – and one of my personal favorites.

Not all senryu have to be funny, however. In fact, many senryu lack that incongruity I mentioned, consequently making the poetry more vulnerable because it doesn't use humor, wordplay, or irony to depict the struggle of being human – it's painting life the way it is, even if that's upsetting or depressing. The following haiku/senryu from *Prune Juice* struck a more somber chord with me:

New Year's Day
my friend, her smart phone
and I

Alexis Rotella, *Prune Juice*, pg. 18

Though this wasn't a funny senryu, it stood out to me. I'm sure a lot of people know what it's like to be with a friend or an acquaintance with the intention of hanging out, starting a nice conversation, and having a good time, but your friend is too busy on her smartphone checking her email, or responding to text messages, or scrolling through social media, or playing Candy Crush, whatever it is, and you're just sort of... left there. It's an incredibly frustrating and lonely feeling. The break between the second and third line illustrates this very well, clearly showing the divide between the speaker and her occupied friend. What makes this senryu more upsetting is that it's New Year's Day. This leads me to believe that this friend had

made a resolution to be on her phone less and be more present with her friends, but she's already slipping back into those old habits.

DRUG FREE SCHOOL ZONE

I wonder how many kids
are on adderall

Chase Gagnon, *Prune Juice*, pg. 70

This haiku was unique in that it struck me both as funny in an ironic way, and it also made me kind of sad based on the two different ways that I read it. One way that I read it was as if the last two lines were spoken in a mocking, antagonistic tone, like, "heh heh, I wonder how many kids are on Adderall [insert condescending smirk here]." But I also saw an elite, competitive high school where many of the students are pressured by past and present students and their performances to take several honors, AP, and IB classes, in addition to dual enrollment courses so they can get a head start on college, plus extracurriculars and honors societies to make your resume look impressive, all on top of having family time, a social life, time for yourself, and possibly even a job. And of course, because this school wants to uphold their reputation, they make it very clear that drugs are strictly prohibited. I see someone older than high school, perhaps fresh out of college, perhaps middle-aged with a family, seeing this and thinking to themselves, "Dear God, I wonder how many kids are on Adderall because they all feel the pressure to keep up with the status quo and be the absolute best."

another day
fighting depression
the class clown

Phyllis Lee, *Prune Juice*, pg. 72

For me, this senryu served as a very real reminder that even though someone may seem okay on the outside, you have no idea how they're truly feeling or what's going on in their life. Clowns have on a full face of makeup, a poufy, multicolored wig, and a goofy costume – they're literally putting on a face (and a costume) and being someone they aren't in real life. I imagine this class clown masking his depression by being funny and making everyone laugh in order to avoid questions about whether or not he's okay, and also perhaps to distract himself from the harsh reality of his 'real' life.

Works Cited

Goodman, Brent, editor. *Prune Juice Book of Senryu: Celebrating 10 Years: 2000-2019*, 2020. Print.

There were so many haiku from this issue that I absolutely loved, but I don't have the space, time, or energy to write about them all. Instead, I've created what I'm calling an "Honorable Mentions" list with *all* the haiku and senryu that I loved but chose not to analyze:

looking for love
in all the wrong places —
and finding it

Bob Lucky, *Prune Juice*, pg. 6

January
I hold my breath
and step on the scale

G.R. LeBlanc, *Prune Juice*, pg. 26

department meeting
an argument
about collaboration

Bob Lucky, *Prune Juice*, pg. 7

science lab
new teacher
quite the specimen

Claudette Russell, *Prune Juice*, pg. 27

Frogpondering

Carlos Colón, *Prune Juice*, pg. 12

meditation . . .
all the places
a body can itch

Terri L. French, *Prune Juice*, pg. 30

cleared for takeoff
a flight attendant
adjusts her bra strap

Bill Kenney, *Prune Juice*, pg. 16

a leaf blower
tidies
the zen garden

Mark E. Brager, *Prune Juice*, pg. 34

Thanksgiving lunch
another helping
of family grief

Alexis Rotella, *Prune Juice*, pg. 18

morning star
all she keeps
from the one-night stand

Mark E. Brager, *Prune Juice*, pg. 34

drinking at a bar —
the old man he swore
he'd never be

Chen-ou Liu, *Prune Juice*, pg. 24

sewing circle
her every glance
needles

Mark E. Brager, *Prune Juice*, pg. 34

hate speech
a bird craps on the racist
and his bullhorn

John McManus, *Prune Juice*, pg. 36

rear view mirror
the faces I make
when she isn't looking

Garry Eaton, *Prune Juice*, pg. 40

rose garden gala
one thorny relative
snags her bridal veil

Autumn Noelle Hall, *Prune Juice*, pg. 41

listening to my rant
my niece asks
'what's a pizza ship?'

Alan S. Bridges, *Prune Juice*, pg. 43

therapy session —
trying to grasp
how to let go

Debbi Antebi, *Prune Juice*, pg. 45

heavy downpour
my collapsible umbrella
promptly collapses

Annette Makino, *Prune Juice*, pg. 51

a fly lands on my crotch
hell i wasn't
using it anyway

Michael Rehling, *Prune Juice*, pg. 54

peace rally
they throw rocks
at the police

Michael Rehling, *Prune Juice*, pg. 54

every breath
a new twist to an old tune
harmonica man

Michael Rehling, *Prune Juice*, pg. 55

emoji pajamas the child's grin

Brad Bennett, *Prune Juice*, pg. 57

shooting star
this fear
of falling

Rachel Sutcliffe, *Prune Juice*, pg. 58

eggshell . . .
as usual we settle
on his color choice

Julie Warther, *Prune Juice*, pg. 64

biology exam
even the frog is on
pins and needles

Joe McKeon, *Prune Juice*, pg. 65

election-day hike —
as much fog on the left
as on the right

Michael Dylan Welch, *Prune Juice*, 71

how much louder
it screams after her death
that wall art

Robert Epstein, *Prune Juice*, pg. 74

Scottish wedding
skirting around the issue
of kilts

David J. Kelly, *Prune Juice*, pg. 76

funeral
at long last
the whole family together

Olivier Schopfer, *Prune Juice*, pg. 90

home late —
the look I get
from the cat

Bryan Rickert, *Prune Juice*, pg. 93

your tumor growing we worry about
the snow

Mary Kendall, *Prune Juice*, pg. 94

corpse pose
our yoga instructor
snores
John J. Dunphy, *Prune Juice*, pg. 95

shooting star —
we are killing
our sons
Mohamad Azim Khan, *Prune Juice*, pg. 96

Facebook fallout
what we didn't meme

to say
Peter Jastermsky, *Prune Juice*, pg. 101

anorexia
I starve myself
of value
Lori A Minor, *Prune Juice*, pg. 103

drug addiction
another line of
I'm sorrys
Lori A Minor, *Prune Juice*, pg. 103

And these three I would've paired together for a matched trio (as opposed to a matched pair):

I reintroduce myself
to Mom
with every spoonful I give her
Debbi Antebi, *Prune Juice*, pg. 45

morphine drip . . .
I sing my mother
a lullaby
Chase Gagnon, *Prune Juice*, pg. 70

telling her I love her
every hour
dementia
Christina Sng, *Prune Juice*, pg. 98