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A Reading of *sanguinella* by Helen Buckingham

For my essay, I will be discussing Helen Buckingham's book *sanguinella*. Buckingham has been regularly writing haiku for close to three decades. *sanguinella* is her latest haiku collection, published in 2017. The collection is a journey throughout her life up until now. She also was kind enough to email me back when I sent her a couple questions regarding her chosen form.

The first thing that struck me as I was reading Buckingham's work was how powerful her haikus are. Buckingham uses different shapes to create more impactful lines, and often adds a lot to the actual imagery within the haiku. But the power is not just their delivery. It also often lies in the gravity of some of the topics they covered. Most of Buckingham's poems are darker than the average haiku one might come across and I found the subjects intriguing. The first haiku from *sanguinella* that struck me deals with death.

anonymous arterial . . . humanity sprayed walls

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 16

This haiku took me to a crime scene. The body is missing, or perhaps so butchered there's no identifying features left, but the walls are covered in a spray of blood. The poem does not tell us who died, and we are only left to wonder who it could be. The reader does not know them, but with the second part, "humanity sprayed walls," they are left with the knowledge that whoever died was human too, with their own life. I think seeing something like that also works in reverse and emphasizes the mortality of the reader's own body. All of this is displayed on the walls in the poem. It is also not presented in the traditional three-line format of a haiku. Buckingham uses many variations within her haikus, and one-liners are not rare. The next haiku, however, was the first I had seen of its kind.

wishing bone
 on broken
 a

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 18

I definitely read this wrong the first time but was struck by how clever it was after I figured it out. It is still technically three lines and read from left to right, but I had never seen a haiku that was read top to bottom and then back up to the top. And to top it off, the whole haiku is shaped like a wishbone, which is the subject of the poem. The actual content of the poem is, of course, still worth noting. Humans wish on many things. Someone may wish upon a star, or a shooting star, when blowing out candles on a cake, or during the minute of 11:11. But wishbones are different in several regards. First, a wishbone requires two people to make a wish and only the person who breaks off the longer piece has their wish come true. Second, the person has likely consumed a bird and then left the bone to dry for a couple days. This is a thoughtful wish; planned every time it is passed while drying. But the haiku also brings attention to how strange the idea of wishing on a broken bone actually is. If this was somebody's broken leg, nobody would be wishing on it.

eye
of the
storm
blood
shot

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 23

At first, I was not entirely sure what to make of this one. But it struck me all the same. Regardless of its meaning, it still immediately brings several images to mind. The eye of the storm has multiple meanings. It can be the calm spot of an actual storm or the most intense part of a situation. Blood shot eyes usually come from crying, or not getting enough sleep, or both. Ultimately it makes me think of something that is supposed to be, or appears to be, calm struggling to keep it all together. Being in the middle of something so tumultuous or chaotic takes a toll, even if that is where it is most calm. I like the clever connection of the two ideas and think the shape of the haiku also adds to it. It is contained in four lines, but the centering of the first and last word is also interesting because the eye of a storm is at its center and it curves the whole poem around the word.

high art
one kid
draws a gun

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 25

Still containing some dark undertones, this haiku is very creative. It has multiple suggestions or double meanings that many of Buckingham's haiku contain. The idea of a drawn picture of a gun being a form of high art, and then the connection to the idea that in old western settings people would have duels and draw their guns at high noon. The connection and back and forth between these two ideas make the reader wonder if this kid who is drawing the gun is perhaps not completely stable. Maybe the kid is sitting in a high school art class and drawing. The use of the word "one" rather than "a" makes it seem like the kid is isolated. They could be the one who is picked on, they could be isolating themselves. Maybe he is lost in his own mind, but the only thing the reader knows about him is he is drawing a gun. The kid could be about to become the next school shooter. Of course, it does not specifically say they are in school either. They could be in an art gallery. The setting and motive of the haiku are all very flexible. But it does still seem to be darker than a western, as there is only one person involved in drawing a gun. And then the poem leaves us hanging there. Nobody knows what happens next. If it was simply a peaceful moment with a kid enjoying their hobby or the calm before the storm with screams about to ring out all around. But either way it leaves the reader with something to think about.

autumn rain
I beg my mum
to haunt me

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 27

This haiku brings an overwhelming air of sadness. The autumn rain sets the mood to be dreary, but then also adds weight to some heavy emotions. The juxtaposition of haunting by definition being typically unwelcome or having a more negative connotation and the speaker asking for it makes the loss of their mother hit even harder. It is as if the speaker is begging as a last resort after having tried various methods of dealing with their loss. There is nothing the speaker can do to bring their mother back and the reader can see their helplessness. The image presented with the feeling of missing someone immediately draws the readers sympathies even if they have not lost anyone close to them to death. People often try to feel the presence of someone they miss when they are lonely or suffocate in their own feelings. And anyone who has gone

through a significant loss can relate to the haiku all the more. Death is always a heavy topic and Buckingham captures very well the helplessness it can bring in just those three lines.

another day
unbathed
this internet affair

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 39

The internet is a rabbit hole not easily climbed out of. This haiku immediately brought to mind an anime I have watched about a girl who lost her job and then spent all her time ignoring the real world and playing an RPG game on her laptop. Day after day she started ignoring her health and hygiene and continued only to play her game in her dark apartment. She was depressed, and the game was the only things she came to care about. The avatar she used in the game was male, and she started dating a female character strictly in the game while her conscience warned her against it. (Yaginuma) The haiku reminded me of these images and the storyline but manages to capture what is basically the essence of the main character and her situation at the beginning of the story. It shows the dependency on the internet and lack of attention to basic tasks people must perform in order to stay healthy. Calling it an affair also hints at the idea that the relationship is not entirely healthy. And the phrase “another day” shows the repetition in and stagnant nature of the speaker’s life. Nothing is changing, and no action is being taken to provoke a change, the speaker stuck in an unhygienic cycle. The actual image this haiku presents is not so destructive on the outside but is ultimately an unattainable and rather gloomy lifestyle. But this shows it is only one point in the journey and must continue on.

linden shadows
watching people watching
the blind man

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 42

This haiku is very much on the outside looking in. Both the speaker and the blind man seem isolated in this poem. The linden trees make me picture a public park type area with people milling all around. The blind man, probably oblivious to the more than likely pitying stares the people around him are giving him. And the speaker is doing what the blind man cannot in watching them back. The speaker is more interested in the people who ostracize the blind man by staring at him than the blind man himself, privately normalizing his disability and possibly judging the more shameless people that are. While the people who are staring must feel safe in the fact that they can stare at the man without it seeming rude because he cannot see they are doing it. The irony of “watching people watching” someone is another way in which Buckingham flips an idea from what the reader expects to an idea that makes them think and see things in a light which they would not otherwise have considered.

all that I am contained within this itch

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 54

Another one-liner, I believe, in a similar parallel to the haiku itself, this haiku encompasses how much Buckingham can contain within one line. When someone has an idea, or a passion, that is so insistent it feels like it is scratching at them until it is completed, it can feel like it is consuming them. But it is also a strong part of them. The urges we have, the goals and ambitions, and what we want to spend our time doing largely define who we are as people. And the vagueness of the haiku makes it largely applicable to anyone. The itch could be anything, good or bad. It picks at the speaker’s mind until it is all-consuming. I personally see it in a more positive light, but in a different headspace I imagine it could also be taken negatively. Perhaps it is an illness or disability of some sort and has become the thought that plagues the speaker. An

itch that cannot be scratched and has taken over their life. But it seems more likely to me that it is more of an impulse the speaker acts on whenever possible. Every reader will relate it to their own life differently.

legend
beneath the statue
DO NOT CLIMB

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 66

Here, Buckingham again uses shapes to illustrate the image her haiku presents. Using the word “legend” and the phrase “beneath the statue” to create the actual image of a statue and then “DO NOT CLIMB” as the base, where the words would be written on an actual statue and act as a label in all capital letters. The poem also brings to mind a certain amount of irony. With a statue of an unnamed legend, one pictures a hero-type who likely broke a lot of rules to become who they were in life. Someone great enough to justify erecting a statue of them. They probably did many great things and it makes the rule placed underneath the statue seem small and unimportant, despite being very noticeable, especially in respect to the rest of the haiku. It almost seems hypocritical to have the words there. When I went on vacation in England and Scotland, I ran around castles and such with lots of different features that were very touchable. Afterward, I made a stop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City on my way back. It was an unreasonably hard switch going from touching everything to nothing when everything I was taking in all seemed equally historic and valuable. I had to physically stop myself from reaching out while reading the constant reminders from the signs all around. Sometimes they are necessary. For when a child learns to read and then also starts to heed such instructions. Or for the people who are so sure they will not break anything, but by sheer numbers and chance most certainly will. The imagery in this haiku can probably bring an immediate picture to the mind of anyone who reads it, as most statues are generally the same in this layout Buckingham presents. My statue is the one of Alexander Hamilton located in Central Park. Other’s may be Brendon Urie in the music video for “Emperor’s New Clothes” where he is depicted as a gargoyle-like creature and actually sings the words “you know legends never die.” (Urie) The image is applicable in many situations and most everyone has seen at least something they can relate it to.

barbed wire
spirals
along the church wall

Buckingham, *sanguinella*, 69

The imagery in this haiku carries itself without diverging from the typical left-aligned, three-line form of regular haiku. Starting with the image of barbed wire, it implies the idea of keeping people out with an unwelcoming environment. Then it introduces a place where all people are supposed to be welcomed without judgement. It shows the hypocrisy of the institution but then also demonstrates the needs for the most innocent places to have means of protecting themselves. It speaks to many instances where churches are very community-oriented and welcoming within their own community, preaching for acceptance and loving your neighbor, but then scorn or persecute people who do not believe in or align with their ideals. This is another example of Buckingham presenting an idea that may create a feeling of wrongness in the reader that would have likely gone unnoticed unless pointed out, like the haunting in “autumn rain.”

When I emailed Buckingham, I asked her about her process and how she forms her haiku. She says each haiku’s form is dictated by the subject matter she has chosen, and she tends to lean toward the idea of “less is more” when it comes to her ideas. Buckingham believes had she expanded some of her shorter haiku, they would have lost their impact, and follows both the spirit and the content of the poem in order to form it with as little regard to any bias of line and syllable count as possible. I believe this accounts for much of the variety found within her poems; the subject matter being as varied as the poems themselves.

Buckingham's book deals with a lot of heavy subject matter presented in unique and interesting ways. It is the first time I have seen these topics dealt with consistently in haiku, and even then, the haiku themselves are written in unique styles. The book also contains many haiku that are more "cheerful" than the ten I discussed in this essay. They contain the journey throughout the author's life, and it has been a hopeful, exciting, and often times unfortunate life. No one could say it is uneventful. Risks and rewards, this is only a taste of what Buckingham conveys to the readers of *sanguinella*. Especially to those who read poetry for the emotional connection but are not necessarily there for the pretty images of nature and love that haiku are stereotypically known for, *sanguinella* is a book I highly recommend. Buckingham will make you think in ways you had not considered before and look at the world through at least slightly changed eyes.

Works Cited

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