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In the World of the Prison: Johnny Baranski and Prison Haiku

Haiku is at its heart a collaborative art form. It connects reader and author across time and space while also overlapping the now, the past, and the future in the subject matter. Haiku is all about connection, which ironically, makes it an incredible art form to discuss prisons, and the suffering and isolation that they breed. Johnny Baranski uses the strength of connection that haiku creates to humanize incarcerated people, forcing the reader to put aside biases and connect with them through the truthfulness of haiku.

Grace

her warm farewell lasts
 far into my very first
 cold night in jail

Baranski, Johnny. *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*, pg 4.

This haiku by Johnny Baranski illustrates how isolating and terrible prison can be, while connecting the reader to important sense memories that we can all share. We all know what it feels like to say tearful farewells and to lie awake at night in the cold, shivering under the blankets. But Baranski adds extra depth with the form of this specific haiku. Isolating the name Grace up in the top right corner above the other lines gives a strong image of this person (Baranski's daughter, for context,) outside the courtroom after sentencing, and the feeling of the warmth of one last hug. For me also, this brings to mind images of people I know at protests being isolated and arrested by agents of the state. The idea of a singular, small person isolated against this wall of text resonates with me to trigger this memory, which is interesting considering my experience was the opposite of Baranski's, as I was outside the confines of the state. This haiku also references the cold of prison, which is a recurring theme in Baranski's writing about prison, as he constantly focuses on the cold and the season of winter.

all broken up
 by the jailhouse window
 the new moon

Baranski, Johnny. *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*, 4.

Baranski taps into an almost cliché image of moonlight filtering through prison bars in this haiku, but also stays true to the form of haiku. However, I love this haiku so much because of that. First, there is the imagery of "all broken up," which conjures in my mind the idea of broken pottery or glass (Baranski 4). This mental image makes me think of a loud shattering noise—then by the jailhouse window, as if the window has been broken, and then the inversion as the window breaker turns out to be the moonlight streaming through. I love this imagery, as it illustrates how incarceration isolates people from nature, with the moon's light literally broken and shattered by the bars of a prison, not able to fully break through.

Also, I chose to place this haiku here because it introduces another constant theme that I noticed in Baranski's work: prison vs. nature. While haiku technique usually uses nature as a lens to explore imagery and themes, Baranski takes this comparison one step further, setting up nature and the experience of prison and diametrically opposed, usually with the prison constricting, twisting, and controlling nature. Contextually, this choice makes sense on Baranski's behalf. His 2.5-year prison sentence was for protesting nuclear arms in Canada, an environmental and anti-war, anti-state issue.

breaking dull routine
 our jail inmate knifes himself
 between enemies

Baranski, Johnny. *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*, 4.

I love how Baranski uses the inversion and surprise technique in this haiku. It is so visceral to me, because many people know the cliché imagery of inmates knifing each other in prison or just general propaganda that all prison inmates are violent, but the inversion in this haiku, an inmate turning his knife on himself out of pure boredom is deeply sad to me. This haiku more than any other in this collection strikes my heart and humanizes incarcerated people to me. I don't know if others will feel the same, but to me the idea of someone who is so bored, so lonely, in such a violent space with such poor quality of life, that they can only think to harm themselves or others, completely breaks my heart. This haiku provides a perfect example as to why I think Baranski's haiku about prison and incarceration are not just beautiful works of art, but so powerful and so necessary. Society trains us to reject and dehumanize incarcerated people, and haiku can connect us with them and their experience to generate empathy, and hopefully, an end to this system. Technically, this haiku is also unique to me in that Baranski put the "inversion" in the middle of the haiku rather than the end, almost severing the breath with the shock of the line "knifes himself" to mimic the imagery.

from the jailyard
 the sound of rioting
 hailstones

Baranski, Johnny. *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*, 15.

Baranski's thematic imagery of "nature vs prison" comes through strong in this haiku. By comparing hailstones to a jail yard riot, Baranski illustrates how the same systems that deprive people of their humanity and isolate them from each other and their families also isolates, controls, and criminalizes natural cycles in the earth. Hail, one of the most natural things in the world—a jail yard riot. However, this haiku can also be read multiple ways, depending on whether the emphasis is on rioting or hailstones. I love how Baranski achieves this with the line break while also keeping the haiku all on the same breath. Because this haiku can also be read as having a surprise ending—not a riot, but simply hail. This reading serves to humanize incarcerated people as well, by tricking the reader into thinking that Baranski might be writing about a prison riot, about violent people better kept away from the world, but instead, it is about a hailstorm—natural rage and fury, possibly even nature raging against the unjust institution of the prison. This reading also highlights how the collaborative aspect of haiku can connect readers to the writer and their experiences, and how haiku connects the past, the present, and the future with the fabric of what is. First, the setting in the jail yard: the past, then into the rioting, the present, and what is happening in the setting, and finally into the future: hailstones. However, the hailstones reflect back onto the present, and invites the reader to consider what actually *is*, and confront whether that reality is what they expect.

in my jail cell
 a shrinking pencil point
 grows many flowers

Baranski, Johnny. *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*, 5.

This haiku speaks to me of quiet and powerful defiance. Prisons are notorious for denying inmates basic resources, especially resources to express themselves. So, the image of a prisoner taking time to express themselves through art is especially poignant. In addition, Baranski once again contrasts nature imagery—growth and flowers—against a shrinking pencil point in a tiny jail cell. Adding to this poignancy is the image of a shrinking pencil, that the person creating the flowers is giving something of themselves to make this art,

to grow this beauty. Reading this haiku, I am struck by the thought that even in prison, there is growth. Even in prison, people can be human, connected to nature, and struggle to keep their humanity.

jail visitor:
the warmth of her eyes
through bulletproof glass

Baranski, Johnny. *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*, 13.

In this haiku, Baranski once again illustrates prison as a cold place. But, he also displays in a small way, the warmth of humanity, of community, triumphing over, or at least piercing through this cold. This haiku also has a pleasing form, a simple set up with the line “jail visitor,” and then the next two lines contrasting each other in this scene—the warm eyes and the bulletproof glass (Baranski 13). Also, the last line feels final and strong, in contrast to the flowy feeling in the first two lines. So this haiku has multiple changes on the breath centering the middle line “the warmth of her eyes,” which also emphasizes this line to me. This emphasis on this line leads me to reflect on human connection and community, specifically with people I care about. Eye contact is difficult for me, so I really connect to the feeling of warmth coming from the eyes, piercing through even bulletproof glass to connect two people. That is such a primal, intimate, human moment that also helps to humanize incarcerated people as *people* who need intimacy and connection just like the rest of us.

Independence Day—
what are we celebrating
behind prison walls

Baranski, Johnny. *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*, 6.

In this haiku, Baranski hits the nail on the head exposing the contradictions between western countries and the injustice of our carceral systems. Almost every country has an Independence Day, but almost every country in the West has prisons overflowing with people denied their independence. It is a sick joke to ask them to celebrate what has been denied to them from behind prison walls. Baranski also phrases this criticism, biting though it is, as a question which is a good choice on his part, especially to connect to the audience. The format of an open-ended question calls the reader in and asks them to genuinely consider whether they can genuinely believe that there is liberty or justice for all in a country with political prisoners like him.

the prison walls
have shortened overnight!
first snow

Baranski, Johnny. *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*, 18.

Once again, Baranski sets up nature and prison in opposition, with the prison walls being shortened by the snow, which indicates to me that even nature itself wants the prisoners out from behind their walls. I also love how Baranski uses humor in this haiku. Most of the haiku I picked for this reader response are (understandably) serious and dreary, but this haiku takes a lighthearted approach to the isolation and disconnection of prison by setting up a joke with the first two lines that the prison walls have shortened, but then using the inversion at the end of the haiku to both provide a punchline for the joke and nature imagery.

Another interesting piece to this haiku is the imagery of fresh snow, clearing away the past and coating everything in white. There is something magical about snow, that can make anyone feel light and happy, and I love how Baranski captures that feeling in this haiku. However, this image also reinforces the idea of

dullness, boredom, and monotony in prison. Snow coats everything in sameness, and the cold will make anyone glad to be inside.

new year—
 prisoner looks through
 the empty calendar

Baranski, Johnny, *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*, 16.

I chose to end with this haiku because it ties together a number of structural and thematic elements central to both haiku and Baranski's style. First, there is the reference to New Year, the idea of winter imagery, and the cold. But also, this reference ties into the idea of snow, and new beginnings. What could be more important to someone imprisoned than a chance at freedom? True freedom—not just from walls, but from the system entirely—a chance at a new beginning. This importance also emphasizes just how heartbreaking an empty calendar is. Because in this case, the empty calendar is not one of opportunity, but the inverse. The empty calendar is not waiting to be filled for the year with opportunities, hope, and excitement, but with nothing, a powerful, profound nothing. This realization also comes thanks to Baranski's technical skill. Reading the haiku at first, it seems as if the prisoner will be looking through the bars, maybe a window, into nature. But instead, Baranski confronts the reader with the reality of the isolation of prison, and connects to the reader's experiences with hope for the new year and planning through a calendar.

Johnny Baranski uses the technique of haiku to form connections with his reader, asking them to question their preconceptions and calling them in to empathize with people who are incarcerated. His haiku about prison are an earnest call for readers to see the reality of prison, especially if that reality conflicts with what they might have been trained to think. Baranski uses humor and juxtaposition of nature and prison and heat and cold to paint vibrant, visceral mental images for his readers. In this way, he triggers his reader's sense of humor, or empathy, or pathos for his and other prisoner's lives and humanity, not by trying to propagandize in one way or another, but simply by telling what is, in a single breath. And in confronting that reality, his readers are invited to grow as people and possibly even change the world into a world without prisons.

Works Cited

Baranski, Johnny. *Pencil Flowers: jail haiku*. New York: Harmony Books, (1999).

Baranski, Johnny. *Convicts Shoot the Breeze*. Saki Press, (2001).