

## Nature's Classrooms

**Natural History: An Interview with Kristen Lindquist**  
*Questions Provided by Peter Newton and Tom Sacramona*

You have been a poet for decades, you studied writing at Middlebury College and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and you received your MFA in poetry from the University of Oregon. Your poetry collection *Transportation* was a finalist for the 2012 Maine Literary Award. What is your favorite memory from your long poetry career?

A true highlight would have to be when Garrison Keillor read three of my poems from my first full-length collection *Transportation* on the podcast *The Writer's Almanac*. (He first read them on air in 2012 and revisited one of those poems in 2021.) To have National Public Radio listeners from all around the country contact me to tell me how much they enjoyed my poems was an experience few poets get, so I was so grateful. And, of course, what a thrill to hear my words read by Keillor's wonderful voice!

Many experiences from years of writing workshops at Middlebury, Oregon, and Bread Loaf helped shaped me as a writer and have stuck with me. The opportunity to work closely with and receive support, motivation, and inspiration from such writers as Li-Young Lee, Phil Levine, Garrett Hongo, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill Matthews, and Julia Alvarez was invaluable when I was a young writer. I even got to co-lead a bird walk at Bread Loaf with Terry Tempest Williams, an amazing author and environmental activist whose memoir *Refuge* remains one of my all-time favorite books. And as an administrative staff member at Bread Loaf, I participated in staff readings, sharing my poems in the same venue where the great Robert Frost read his poems years ago!

In recent years, finding out I was going to be included in *A New Resonance 12* was a very exciting moment for me. This thrill was

only enhanced by learning that the three others in my haiku group who were also *New Resonance* finalists had been accepted as well, so we were all able to celebrate together. I hadn't been publishing haiku for very long and knew the process was highly competitive, so that was hugely validating and affirming for me.

**Since November 2009, you have been writing a daily haiku blog—quite a commitment to the form. What inspired you to start this blog, and how has your haiku writing evolved since the start of it?**

For many years, I had a very intense job which didn't leave me a lot of time or brain space to be creative. I wanted to write more, but couldn't figure out how to squeeze it in. I decided I needed to adopt a daily practice of some kind to help jump-start my creative process, and I figured that the shortest poetic form, haiku, would be perfect for my purposes. So I began a daily blog writing the 5-7-5 haiku like we all learn in grade school—not really haiku, but short syllabic poems. They were often too poetic, full of personification and metaphor, and punctuated. Thankfully, several years into this project, Peter Newton—a poet friend from my Bread Loaf days—kindly began to help me understand what contemporary English-language haiku is all about. My first published haiku was accepted by Peter in 2018 for *tinywords*. (That's another favorite moment worthy of inclusion in my previous response!) He shared some of his own poems with me and also helped open my eyes to the larger world of haiku out there, for which I am eternally grateful. I read everything about haiku that I could get my hands on (and still do!): poems by the Japanese masters Bashō, Buson, Issa, Chiyo-ni, and Shiki; contemporary journals, anthologies, and collections; Blyth (despite his misogyny), Henderson, Higginson, and Reichhold. Slowly but surely, I took it all in and developed my own sense of what makes a haiku a haiku, and then what makes a good haiku, via this immersion method. So probably the last five years or so of my daily blog comprise “real” haiku. And that daily creative practice, whatever the result, has become a necessary part of my day and life.

**You're an avid bird-watcher and self-taught naturalist. When did this love affair with the avian species begin, and how has that influenced your writing?**

Haiku poet Jeff Hoagland often talks about his “love affair with nature.” I too have felt that way about the natural world since childhood. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, back-to-the-landers who had an organic farm here in Maine with woods, shoreline, and fields to explore. I remember getting my first field guides from them when I was four or five, and I’ve spent my whole life learning about the other living things with which we share space. I became especially enamored with birds after identifying a breathtaking bird on a fence post of their sheep pasture as a cedar waxwing. There is so much about birds to attract a poet: the beauty of their plumage, the mysteries of migration, their ability to fly, their music . . .

I love nothing more than wandering through a landscape, ostensibly birding, trying to be visually and aurally attuned to my surroundings. It’s a form of meditation for me and also a great state of mind in which to compose haiku as I walk the trails. So naturally, because birds are my primary focus, I write a lot of haiku about birds. And in the absence of—or in addition to—birds, I may also pay attention to flowers, trees, butterflies, dragonflies, snakes, squirrels, salamanders, mushrooms, mosses, lichens, bedrock, seashells, etc. Birding has become the main portal through which I enjoy nature, but I love it all deeply and profoundly—and need to spend time in the woods to stay sane and grounded. And it’s especially meaningful to me to share birds with others, to turn them on to the joy of watching birds, because it’s good clean fun that anyone can participate in almost anywhere. But also because it’s one of the gateway drugs of nature: an interest in birds can lead you to butterflies or wildflowers or a park or river in your community, as well as a larger interest in the natural world and its preservation for the benefit and sustenance of all life on this beleaguered planet.

As a birder and naturalist, one of the aspects of my haiku that I particularly enjoy focusing on is, of course, the seasonal reference. The seasonal reference is what ties us to the cycle of life, the circle of time, in the most basic but profound way. When I first saw

Higginson's seasonal almanac, that really spoke to me. We get all the seasons here in northern New England, including mud season and stick season, and each one has its natural markers: maple sap running in early spring, for example, or the crimson color of blueberry barrens in fall. I have a deep awareness of what warblers will arrive each spring or where to look for the first trilliums. I try to put this knowledge to use with varying degrees of specificity in my haiku. I think most haiku poets, especially those rooted in a place they love, develop their own personal seasonal almanac, whether consciously or not.

hay-scented ferns  
my childhood  
as a horse<sup>1</sup>

fresh snow  
crows here and there  
up to something<sup>2</sup>

a well-worn guide  
to hawks in flight  
stacked clouds<sup>3</sup>

sunset glow . . .  
a line of waxwings  
fills a bare branch<sup>4</sup>

In your interview "Why I write" in the autumn issue of *Blithe Spirit*, you make it clear that writing haiku has absorbed the time you used to spend writing longer poetry. In the last year, you started writing haibun. How much do you write haibun versus haiku these days? What are your reasons for chasing your inspiration with one form versus the other? Does haibun offer you something that haiku does not? Or, to put it a different way, to what degree do you regard haibun writing as a kind of advanced study for a haiku writer? Certainly, haibun can't succeed without a strong haiku that carries its own weight, no matter how strong the prose. Are you seeing an uptick in the level of involvement in haibun among the haiku community?

For many years, I wrote a monthly natural history column for the local paper, and I still write the occasional freelance nature article. Once I became fascinated by haiku, it was a natural progression to haibun, where I could combine the two genres I love—natural history prose and poetry—in one form. I still feel like a newcomer to the world of haibun, with so much to learn, but it also feels like the form I've been working toward my whole life. The great thing about haibun that is different from haiku is that the form enables narratives of all kinds—nature essays, short stories, travel journal entries like Bashō wrote, memoirs, even non-haiku poems— but not at the expense of the haiku. The challenging thing about haibun is that you can't compose one in your head and carry it around while you do other things, as I often do with haiku. For a while, I was trying to draft a haibun every Friday, which was my day off. Sometimes, when I need inspiration, I dig into old longer-form narrative poems that I had never been satisfied with, re-crafting them into haibun prose, and then coming up with the right haiku and title. So I think haibun, rather than haiku, now answers the creative impulse that used to inspire me to write longer poems. But I still write more haiku than anything. The haiku is my touchstone as a writer.

I don't think I regard haibun writing as an "advanced study" for a haiku writer because that implies some sort of hierarchy of creative forms. Rather, it's a different discipline altogether, albeit one that the haiku poet can probably grasp more easily than a nonhaiku poet trying the form. But even for an accomplished *haijin*, there are more and different moving parts you need to get right for a haibun to be successful—it's a haiku and prose and the title, all working together, but not too closely together. Finding that perfect balance is hard but so satisfying.

It certainly feels to me like more and more haiku poets are at least trying their hand at haibun. And there are more essays out there about the prosody of the form, as well. More importantly, there's a lot of experimentation happening. Poets are playing with different ways to tell stories and share experiences in the prose of their haibun, which I find very stimulating and inspiring. For me, that's a

way to keep the form fresh and interesting without shutting out the reader, as some experiments with form can do.

When I was asked by the Haiku Foundation to coordinate the new Touchstone Award for Haibun, I quickly agreed because it's important for me to see good haibun receive the literary recognition that they deserve in the haikai community; it's an honor for me to be helping to make that happen. I can't wait to see what the panelists select from this first wonderful crop of nominations.

### **Natural History**

The boardwalk through the lush primeval swamp takes you past true giants: old-growth bald cypress trees over 500 years old. Some of these trees were standing tall when the first pillaging conquistadors landed on the Florida coast. They've survived centuries of hurricanes, cycles of drought, and rampant deforestation. Native Seminoles and runaway slaves hid among their trunks, subsisted. Generations of wood storks, ibises, herons, and egrets have clung to these branches, tended messy nests. Songbirds you never see sing loudly in the overstory above the moldering remains of an old plume-hunters' camp. Curling leaves of epiphytes sprout from bark, soak up the heavy air. Alligators sun at the trees' feet, or snakes, soundless in the dark water. Occasionally, rumors of a panther. Under your small palms, one huge tree's fibrous bark feels rough and dry, the curling cover of an ancient book.

blooming  
amid the ghost stories  
ghost orchid<sup>s</sup>

**Landscape and nature in general are central to the practice of writing haiku. How has living in Maine, specifically near Monhegan Island, influenced your writing, if at all?**

I can't imagine a better place to be a writer who focuses on nature! When you think of Maine, what comes to mind? Spruce forests, a rugged rocky coastline, summer camps on cold lakes, long winters, scenic harbors full of sailboats, lobster bakes, blueberry barrens, and moose, right? Maine is a very rural state in northern New England, at the edge of the continent. We have a long, rich history of farming, forestry, and fishing. We value our landscape and time spent outdoors: a state bond for land conservation always receives high bipartisan support. And this landscape has inspired a great cultural heritage, as well, fostering generations of artists and writers. I spend a lot of time on Monhegan, a small island about 10 miles offshore in Muscongus Bay that is a microcosm of many of the things that make Maine special: it's a year-round fishing/lobstering community as well as a longtime art colony (noted painter Jamie Wyeth has a home there, for one); most of the island is conservation land protected by a land trust started by Thomas Edison's son Ted in the 1950s, accessed by 17 miles of trail; and it's a nationally recognized birding hotspot. I visit the island for the bird migration every spring and fall, but visit other times of year to simply enjoy the wildlands and the scenic village of about 60 year-round residents, take hundreds of photographs, and feel like I'm somewhere "apart." The place helps me keep my head on straight and inspires a lot of my writing, although I don't usually write much on the island—I just want to be exploring and in the moment when I'm there.

Also, I was born in Maine, and have lived in or around Camden most of my life. My mother's family has been here for many generations. So this is my home turf—which provides an added emotional connection to the landscape which is such a vital component of my community.

loose strands of rockweed . . .  
 a small boy splashes  
 into his father's arms<sup>6</sup>

island sunset  
 someone rows a red dory  
 out of the harbor<sup>7</sup>

**Can you unpack the different relationships that sustain your writing life? You have many relationships with writers, friends, and poets, but significantly, your husband is a novelist. I think we would all love to know a bit more about what he writes (if you can share).**

It makes such a difference to find your community as a writer. When I moved back to Maine after grad school in the early 1990s, I was fortunate to join a small group of women poets, including Maine's first poet laureate, Kate Barnes, who helped nurture and sustain my poetic practice for many years. In 2019, as I was starting to get serious about haiku, Peter Newton encouraged me to attend the Haiku Circle, a gathering of haiku poets in western Massachusetts. Later that summer, I attended another haiku gathering, Wild Graces, in southern New Hampshire. Through those two events, I found my people and serendipitously stumbled into the amazing haiku group to which I now belong, the Broadmoor Haiku Collective. Since the start of the pandemic, the nine of us have met monthly by Zoom (the other members live in New York, Florida, and Massachusetts). It would be no small exaggeration to say that the support and inspiration of this group not only sustained me through the isolation of the pandemic, but also changed my life by setting me firmly on the path of haiku. Thanks to Zoom, I have also been able to actively participate with the Haiku Poets of Northern California and Haiku San Diego, as well as lead a small, local haiku study group.

My husband, Paul Doiron, is a successful crime novelist who has written an award-winning, best-selling series featuring a Maine game warden. (The first book in the series is *The Poacher's Son*, for those who might be looking for a well-written, atmospheric mystery.) He has attended one of my haiku workshops, but doesn't generally write poetry. So we understand and support each other's writing life but aren't competitive at all. In fact, I'm the first reader of everything he writes. He reads my haiku blog, but I think he prefers my haibun. Since our writings have been inspired by the same Maine places—including the North Woods, run-down mill towns, Acadia National Park, and the coastal islands—we have actually done several mixed-genre readings together. He reads excerpts from his gritty fiction, and I read poems set in the same landscapes or that tell stories about people who could be characters in his books.



**What feedback on your writing have you received that has meant the most to you? For readers who might not have as many writers in their life, or whose significant others or friends are not literary-minded, what would be your advice about the editing process?**

First off, your invitation to participate in this Nature's Classroom interview really means a lot to me, Tom. I look up to you and Peter as poets and editors, and I am grateful to you both for these thought-provoking questions and your faith that my responses will be worth sharing with *Frogpond* readers.

I think, for any writer, being recognized by peers has tremendous value. So having poems nominated and/or long-listed for a Touchstone Award has been very meaningful, in addition to having poems included in the annual Red Moon Press anthologies. When my e-chapbook *It Always Comes Back* was published by Snapshot Press, *Poetry Pea* podcast and journal founder Patricia McGuire generously invited her podcast listeners to read the book (available for free download at [www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm](http://www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm)) and share which were their favorite poems and why. That feedback, and her featuring my chapbook in her podcast, was so gratifying. As was Paul Miller's review of the chapbook in *Modern Haiku*.

On a personal level, I am very fortunate to be able to workshop regularly with haiku friends whose editorial insights I respect and trust. I feel very strongly that this kind of input is necessary to strengthen and improve one's work. The Haiku Society of America offers a great mentoring program for those who are new to haiku or looking for a workshopping group ([www.hsa-haiku.org/mentors.htm](http://www.hsa-haiku.org/mentors.htm)). I'd also recommend attending in-person haiku gatherings if and whenever possible to meet and make connections with other haiku poets in person, get familiar with each other's work, and see where it goes.

**What keeps you coming back to haiku, as a writer and as a person? Can you curate a selection of a few poems that you feel most get at who you are as a poet?**

There's something about haiku that just gets me, no matter how many I read or write. I love the brevity of haiku, how just a few words can

create strong, clear images that transport the reader directly into a moment. How we all keep coming up with fresh and interesting poems. How you can carry a haiku with you like a talisman or a smooth stone in your pocket. Since I began my daily haiku practice, my day is incomplete until I've written one worth sharing on my blog; the creative habit—and the meditative, observant state of mind it requires—sustain and ground me in some essential way.

solstice bash  
in bed with the bonfire  
still in my hair<sup>8</sup>

ready or not . . .  
a girl aligns her body  
with an apple tree<sup>9</sup>

low tide at sunrise  
the tiny out-breaths  
of coquinas<sup>10</sup>

some stories  
take all day to tell  
red-eyed vireo<sup>11</sup>

### Notes:

1. *Modern Haiku* 53:3 (Fall 2022)
2. *Akitsu Quarterly* 48 (Winter 2020)
3. *Presence*, Issue 68 (November 2020)
4. *Blithe Spirit* 32.4 (November 2022)
5. *Contemporary Haibun Online* 17:3 (December 2021)
6. *Modern Haiku* 53:1 (Spring 2022)
7. *Presence* 73 (July 2022)
8. *Acorn* 48 (Spring 2022)
9. *Kingfisher* 6 (October 2022)
10. *First Frost* 4 (Fall 2022)
11. *tinywords* 22.1, 4/11/22

*Kristen Lindquist* is a writer and naturalist living on the coast of Maine. A member of the Broadmoor Haiku Collective, she serves as coordinator for the Haiku Foundation's new Touchstone Award for Haibun and is a book reviewer for *Frogpond*. Her e-chapbook *It Always Comes Back* was the winner of the 2020 Snapshot Press eChapbook Award.