

[00:00:18.540] - Sangita

Music . . .

. . . namaste, everyone.

Welcome to Ripples in the sand, a podcast brought to you by the folks at *Drifting Sands Haibun*. Here we will be inviting haibun poets who have appeared in this journal to both read and discuss their poetry. I am your host, Sangita Kalarickal.

I am a novice on the haikai path and I'm still learning the art of haiku. Now, haiku, as you know, is prose (---?---) with haiku, which, unlike haiku and Tanka, is titled. In this series of readings, I hope we not only get to hear excellent haibun, but also learn a little bit more about the form and the creation of the piece.

Our first guest in the podcast is Andrew Riutta. Andrew was born and raised in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He is a father, chef and writer. His essays, short fiction and poetry have been published in journals and anthologies. In 2011, his essay, *The Myths of Manhood*, was published in a collection of essays for National Public Radio. This, I believe, on fatherhood. In 2012, he was Featured on Public Radio International Bob Edward Show. He won the 2008 William Shaw memorial prize for poetry for his poem "Lung Cancer."

[00:01:59.460] - Sangita

Welcome, Andrew.

[00:02:01.690] - Andrew

Hi. Thanks for the invitation and I'm happy to be here.

[00:02:05.440] - Sangita

Before we start off, Andrew, I just wanted to ask you, how long have you been writing this Japanese poetry form?

[00:02:17.360] - Andrew

I would say I came across an interest in it probably around 2004, after I, one of my favorite writers, Jim Harrison—he had written a book called *After Ikkyu* and it was a contemporary Asian style and that was sort of what began my interest in pursuing, like, haiku and tanka and so on and so forth.

[00:02:44.140] - Sangita

Did you write free verse before? Were you into free verse?

[00:02:48.360] - Andrew

Yes, I did. Yes, I had written some free verse, though I wouldn't say terribly successfully. Actually, the Asian forms taught me so much about writing and about using concrete language and telling, or showing, not telling, that sort of thing.

[00:03:08.410] - Sangita

It's a great exercise in that. So did you start writing haibun or did you start with haiku?

[00:03:15.040] – Andrew

No, I started with haiku. I started with haiku and I dabbled in haiku for a couple of years and then at some point, tanka, I took an interest in tanka. And those two extra lines for me seemed to add up to a whole lot more legroom and also just the more emotional components of concrete as well. I had a fair amount of success with that as far as I did a couple of collections of tanka and I didn't really have a whole lot of interest in haibun.

[Snip]

[00:03:49.120] - Sangita

That's great that you're into haibun, because all your haibun are—the ones that I have read—I can't profess to have read all of your haibun, but the ones that have been published, in *Drifting Sands*, absolutely fantastic. I really enjoy today. I believe you'll start off with a haibun of yours published in *Drifting Sands* earlier this year in issue 14, titled "For Jack Chambers Jr." This haibun has a unique combination of respect and tenderness. That's one thing.

[00:04:27.880] - Andrew

I really appreciate that, because that was certainly the aim, I think. And I really appreciate that because I think watching my dad grow older and more vulnerable, and I really wanted something that could somewhat encapsulate him as a person, but also his sacrifices, his lasting sacrifice that he continues to have to suffer, and also his resolve within that that.

He doesn't necessarily feel cheated or he's still a very proud Marine, and I wanted to try to touch on that.

[00:05:09.860] - Sangita

Okay, wonderful. Let's listen to "For Jack Chambers. Jr."

[00:05:15.340] - Andrew

Well, thank you . . .

. . . "For Jack Chambers, Jr."

Middle of February and outside, the snow just keeps piling up. My father, an old United States Marine. Raises his handicap recliner so he can stand for the national anthem playing at the Detroit Red Wings game on television. He doesn't salute, but I can tell that he wants to. After Vietnam, they had him folding flags at funerals for boys whose jawbones had been blown right through their temporal lobes—their very brains. These days, He eats microwave popcorn and listens to gospel songs on his phone. Willie, Billy Strings, classic Dolly Parton. He told me once that his legs have become so contorted and stiff from all the Agent Orange and arthritis, they'll probably have to snap his bones just to fit him into his coffin.

But Semper Fi, he said.

holy Bible
a cigarette inside
flat as roadkill

[00:06:26.810] - Sangita

The haiku at the end is such a powerful image. "Holy Bible, cigarette inside, flat as roadkill." Would you please elaborate on that?

[00:06:40.240] - Andrew

Well, it's not an uncommon thing. My dad is Native American, and it's not uncommon in a lot of Native American homes to have a mix of symbols as far as some Christian and some traditional. And many people even thrive within that. They don't find a conflict at all. They're able to thrive within it. And so it's not an uncommon thing because in the Native tradition, tobacco is a sacred, one of the sacred medicines, so it's often given as a gift or something similar. And so that's the symbolism there.

[00:07:23.210] - Sangita

I didn't know that. I did not know that the importance of tobacco, of the symbolism. Thank you.

Now, this haibun was from your latest book, "Blessed: Modern Haibun on Almost Every Despair" from Red Moon Press, which was released earlier this year, right?

[00:07:50.060] - Andrew

Yes.

[00:07:51.940] - Sangita

Would you like to say something about it?

[00:07:54.580] - Andrew

I'm very pleased that Red Moon published it, and I suppose I wanted to be a meditation on both light and dark, but also things like faith and sheer heart and survival and all the things, all the obstacles that we run into every day that sometimes can actually make us stronger, more insightful people, perhaps. And my grandparents struggled, and within that there was just something, my grandmother, her frugality was just amazing. It was an art form in and of itself, and I wanted this book to capture those graces that we sometimes forget and maybe we even missed. That was the aim of the collection. And with the help of Jim over at Red Moon, I was definitely able to approximate that.

[00:09:07.990] - Sangita

I think Blessed reads like a soliloquy of experiences and people and has brilliantly written harbor. So would you like to introduce and read your next haibun from the book?

[00:09:22.160] - Andrew

Yeah, sure thing.

I am going to read "A Copper Country Romance."

My first girlfriend's name was Wanda. She was born with a missing index finger, though she still had one to point and blame, which she did. But it was never my fault. Blame the morning, for it is here. Blame anyone and anything. Blame the four winds. Blame Mom and Pa. New love screams in the faces of those who devote themselves wholly to its mammalian sense. I glanced up at a robin when I should have been worshipping her 13 year old curves. I was caught skipping stars across the darkness when she wanted me to focus on her music. This is the dance that twirls itself to the lunatic noises of lust and let down. This is the beautiful sky at dusk, purple as a shiny bruise.

4th of July sparklers
a shadow
of us.

[00:10:38.590] - Sangita

"I glanced up at a robin, and I should have been worshipping her 13 year old curves," so beautiful. There's such a vivid understanding of young love, that time of youth when one is focused on oneself and the time when one is trying to understand oneself. And for most people, it is a struggle. Kind of the phrase purple as a shiny bruise summarizes it I feel. What do you think?

[00:11:06.400] – Andrew

Yeah, I was recalling off of my own experiences, but I wanted with this particular piece, which, believe it or not, it's a couple of years old. And for some reason, the piece has gotten more and more likable for me personally. But I guess I wanted more than anything to know that within all that raw and romantic tension, there is an innocence that's worth mentioning. And I was trying to capture that. I was hoping that the piece could account for some of that innocence.

[00:11:43.560] - Sangita

Yes, it's very appealing. I love this piece. I really do love this piece.

[00:11:47.740] - Andrew

Thank you so much.

[00:11:49.170] - Sangita

Please tell us about the title. "Copper Country Romance." Does it refer to where you grew up?

[00:11:55.540] - Andrew

Yeah, I grew up in, if you look at Michigan, there's a Lower peninsula and an Upper Peninsula. I was born and raised in the Upper Peninsula, but if you go even further into the or even higher into the peninsula, there's a place called the Copper Country. It's comprised of, I think, four or five counties. They were very big at the turn of the century. Very big this past century. Very big for copper mining. And of course, they're all mostly shut down now, but it is still called the Copper country.

[00:12:34.840] – Sangita

I see. Okay. Yeah. I absolutely love this haibun. Your depth of understanding. People really came through in it. Finally, let's listen to one last time from you. What would you like to read to us next?

[00:12:49.760] - Andrew

Oh, I'm going to read one about my grandmother who immigrated from Finland to the copper country and very beautiful, strong woman. And so I would like to read this. It's called "Irene"

My grandmother must have brought it over with. It from the old country. The recipe for making a home. Stacked Bibles and tar paper, a can of lard, then three feet of snow piled on top, a corner for the sewing machine, a spot to hang Jesus. The creak of every door that opens and closes. The word for hope and Finnish. A stiff finger to break the soil. One apple tree. Two daughters, a dead son, a faithful husband. Finally a Formica table to roll it all out, to flatten the dimensions, to bring Heaven closer to the earth.

endless road
the sky curves
into blackbirds.

[00:14:06.640] - Sangita

You've just heard Irene, such a stunning haibun from Andrew. I think you want to see it laid out on the page. The form is different. There is prose, there is free verse poetry. There is a crowning glory, which is the haiku.

Andrew, many of the haibun in your book, especially for Jack Chambers, Jr. Comes from a place of profound emotions within the heart. Would you say that having said this in a haibun form is more effective than other forms of expression, like free verse poetry or a song?

[00:14:46.160] - Andrew

It's a very subjective thing. I can speak for myself. As far as when I first feel like I dearly connected to haibun, it seemed like just a perfect vessel for, as you just said, lots of raw emotion. And I don't know, maybe because it's not free verse and I didn't . . . there's an irony in that. It's a traditional form, and yet I felt even more free than with free verse, if that makes any sense. If that makes any sense. It became whatever I needed it to be, and that made it just so incredibly beautiful and continues to it's so.

[00:15:36.940] - Andrew

Enjoyable reading your work. Well, as you know, I'm a novice, and like many of our listeners, I'm sure, I'm looking to understand this form of poetry better. Now, since you've been writing haibun for so long. In your experience, what do you think is the most important aspect of writing a haibun?

[00:16:00.710] - Andrew

Do you mean technically or emotionally or both?

[00:16:05.590] - Sangita

Both. Yeah.

[00:16:10.390] - Andrew

One of the rules of thumbs I've always had is don't be afraid to take chances, take risks, because you can follow all the rules and do all the things that you believe are expected of you, and there's still going to be people that criticize. And that being said, you may as well just do what you feel and take chances. And I don't mean be gratuitous. I don't mean that. I'm just saying you take emotional risks and be vulnerable. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable. Too many people want to. Or I shouldn't say that, but I mean, I myself, I tried to tap dance, maybe around certain moods and feelings and emotions, and I got to a point where the older I get, it's just not very practical anymore to skirt around my emotions. And so at the risk of sometimes looking and sounding like a fool.

[00:17:24.190] - Sangita

Thank you for reading all your work

Andrew

This is real joy and thanks for the great questions, and it was really great.

[00:17:30.570] - Sangita

I have one more question for you. What are you currently working on? Are you working on anything right now in the project or just writing?

[00:17:38.950] - Andrew

Not really working on anything currently, other than wanting to promote my book a little bit more. I'm still gathering my own relationship with Haibun. I want to be able to stretch it as much as I can within my own subjective emotions, I suppose. And it's already for me, it's provided me with a lot of growth emotionally. It's given me an opportunity to examine myself. It's more than just exercise and a literary exercise. It's much more than that.

[00:18:30.340] - Sangita

It's still a student, you feel.

[00:18:36.560] - Andrew

Yeah. Again, the lack of fear, I suppose, and being vulnerable, I think that's been more my approach to how if I had a particular approach, it would be that I'm willing to be vulnerable. And again, like I said, even be come across as foolish sometimes. And if it means that I'm able to get at certain emotions or certain memories or even sketching people, sketching the people that have been in my life, which is a big part of my collection, is so much of it is made up of people. So all these things, all these things, they get thrown into the haibun , kitty. And just about every day it gives birth to something new, I would say.

[00:19:39.430] – - Sangita

Wonderful. Thank you. That was remarkable. Thank you, Andrew.

[00:19:47.530] - Andrew

Thanks very much for the invitation and the great questions.

- Sangita

You kicked started our podcast off with a blast. So we feel that reading words is a wonderful experience in itself, but reading out the words aloud is better. It's quite like tasting the words right and then hearing the poetry read by the poet takes that experience to a completely different level. So thank you again, Andrew, and we look forward to reading your work.

[00:20:16.500] - Andrew

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing more with the series. I look forward to hearing other artists and authors as well.

[00:20:25.310] - Sangita

That was Andrew Riutta reading some of his haibun. His book *Blessed: Modern Haibun on Almost Every Despair* is available from the Red Moon press. Many of his haibun are featured in *Drifting Sands*. Feel free to go to the website and browse previous issues. The music for *Ripples in the Sand* was from grahnArt by Richard Grahn and the podcast is edited by Richard Grahn. This is Sangita Kalarickal. Thank you for listening. Stay tuned for the next episode.