

The Love Haiku of Raymond Roseliep

by Randy Brooks

In the essay “A Spiritual Quest Through the Haiku of Raymond Roseliep” [2] I explored the spiritual basis of Raymond Roseliep’s haiku poetics. To summarize, Roseliep asserted that

The poet is an animal with the sun in his belly. He is one breed of the species cited by Luke the Physician as “a whole body ... filled with light” (11:36)... He is essentially a maker — in their word for “poet” the Greeks embodied that concept, and the Scandinavians named him “word-smith.” The poet is himself made to the image and likeness of God, and on the highest level of his operation he imitates the Creator. With language he puts flesh on ideas and feelings; to airy nothing he gives local habitation and name.

In this essay I will examine how Roseliep explored the possibilities of writing love haiku, employing that same spirit of the maker or creator. For Roseliep the two most sacred themes are creation and love, so it is natural that he would explore both in his haiku.

Love Poem
who will I give it
to [3]

In an interview with Roseliep published in 1979 [4] Sister Mary Thomas Eulberg asked him about how a priest could be writing such evocative, sometimes erotic, love poetry. “To talk about that,” Roseliep said, “I should return for a moment to that Catholic-poetry period of mine, and I can briefly tell you how it was inevitable that I needed a fresh theme. In those early days I was writing about the Mass, the sacraments, parish experiences, religious encounters of all dimensions — in people, nature, anywhere.” He added: “I needed a new outlook. I knew that religious poetry and love poetry are the hardest of all to write, and since I hadn’t attained full success in one, I would try the other. And I have been exploring the love theme ever since. It’s wonderful. It keeps me alive and young and remembering; and always with feelings that are deepest and most sacred in all of us.”

moth
nor lover’s breath
disturb my candle [5]

In this exploration of Roseliep’s love haiku, I will present the haiku not as biographical instances but as creations of a talented literary artist — a haiku poet capable of remembering feelings of attraction, imagining young lovers or newlyweds, and appreciating the long-lasting love of an old couple sitting on the porch with nothing to say. In his essay “This Haiku of Ours,” published in 1976, [6] he writes:

The first-person-singular — in spite of constant war against it by our more conservative haiku writers and editors — is prevalent in the work of the best Japanese haiku artists. I shudder to think of Issa without the very personal self in those whimsies of his. So, I favor the perpendicular pronoun when we can somehow universalize the experience, prepare the reader to recognize himself in the “I” or to participate in the captured insightful moment.

Roseliep is aware of the literary construct of voice and perspective available only in the first person, and his haiku create immediacy through the use of this device, clearly an attempt at universal rather than private moments of the self. In the same way the anonymous “you” becomes a character being addressed for immediate and universal experience. Speaking from the first person, his haiku invite us to become the narrator, the participant, the person alive as anyone who therefore speaks the feelings of everyone.

waiting for my love.
the incurled
apple bud [7]

Roseliep is a writer with a rich vocabulary of human experience and a wealth of imagination. I invite you to join in this reading of his explorations of the love theme that is evident throughout his career as a haiku poet. He understands the value of perspectives and personae, even with the use of first person in his haiku. In one of his earliest haiku, Roseliep expresses his awareness of the poet’s mask and how he will employ it to explore love poetry.

After Loving

Wear the poet’s mask
saying you’ll manage without
her. Be quick. Drink up. [8]

Longing for Love & Memories of Love Lost

An irony of love poetry is that some of the best poems come from a longing for love or memory of a lost love. Roseliep’s narrators speak of “little love” and “no love” and “waiting for his lover” and the memory of love. Roseliep’s haiku-poet persona Sobi-Shi sometimes struggles with love:

Sobi-Shi waiting
for his lover ...
ants are rebuilding [9]

Apparently while waiting for his lover, Sobi-Shi has tromped upon an anthill. The ants busily rebuild their home, but what is Sobi-Shi building?

in Sobi-Shi’s glass
the dark rose
of a love ago [10]

Sobi-Shi is alone with his glass of wine, drinking a dark rose that brings back memories of a love ago. Another haiku speaks of a dream left behind:

leave the dream
in the sand
where we slept [11]

Most of Raymond Roseliep’s love haiku, however, are not full of regret, nor are they angst-filled poems of longing for love. They are celebrations of finding love, even if it is just “a little love” found in a milkweed pod giving its seeds to the wind:

the little love
you give;
milkweed [12]

The milkweed gives itself fully to the sun, to the wind, to the monarch butterfly, and is celebrated by the haiku narrator's voice.

Young Lovers

Many of Roseliep's haiku explore young lovers or the start of a budding romance. In his 1965 book *Love Makes the Air Light* he wrote:

Lover

Innocent as ice
cream, his hand on the oval
of your white belly. [13]

He writes haiku about a young girl:

the girl tossed a flame
or flower in the old well
... I'm too late to tell [14]

pillowed
on the breasts of the girl
who picks turnips [15]

And in another haiku, a young lover out of breath with love:

her
breath
and
the
rose
caught
in
my
mouth [16]

In another haiku, there is realization of sharing intimate space, of sharing a love song and seeing each other in this shared music and light:

love song

I enter
your mirror [17]

Young lovers go for walks and hold hands, sometimes for security:

wildwood

where your hand
clings more [18]

And how lyrical, to express the excitement of a new relationship with love talk and the immediacy of a request to be held:

you ask
if trees sing:
hold me [19]

One of Roseliep's most interesting haiku portraying the complexity of young love is this:

the bones of a bird
on the spring path of lovers
not saying a word [20]

The image of the bird bones speaks of death and loss of something beautiful, perhaps a songbird. That is a leftover from winter, now revealed on the spring path. The lovers are full of new love, enjoying the spring flowers, but the bones leave them with nothing to say. Are they thinking of the future? Where their bones will remain some day? Will they be alone on a path or together? The voice of this haiku is so interesting too. Who is not saying a word? The haiku narrator, perhaps alone on a lover's path? Or the lovers who have been so full of conversation about plans and dreams and the future, suddenly brought to silence by the bones? A rich haiku of young love, dreams and mortality.

One more haiku expressing a new love:

phoenix pin
in her hair
we walk the moon home [21]

Perhaps, with a phoenix pin, this an old love reignited, a love that has been reborn and the couple is full of light as they return. The moon has become their companion, and they have fun bringing the moon and their renewed romance home.

Erotic Love

Of course, Roseliep's love haiku go beyond explorations of young lovers and new romance. He also wrote haiku celebrating erotic love — the sensuality of desire and passionate sex. His erotic haiku are written with images that celebrate sensual sexuality as natural joys that bond lovers together.

two butterflies
love-knot
the air [22]

our bodies
honeysuckle
knots [23]

Just as butterflies bond in midair, Roseliep's erotic haiku are about intimate closeness and bonding of lovers — the union of lovers in moments of before, during, and after making love.

can't tell

the petal
from the kiss [24]

her peach bloom;
the soap smell
of a man [25]

Roseliep's haiku place erotic love in natural settings, with the birds, flowers, fruits, and moon all becoming part of the intimacy between lovers.

before love:
the meadowlark's
alarm note [26]

black raspberries
your name breaking
in the soft burst [27]

making love;
the oxeye
daisy [28]

in weeds where we love
sudden lantern
of a firefly [29]

Instead of nature interrupting their lovemaking, the firefly becomes part of the celebration of love. Although we often associate fireflies with childhood games of chasing and capturing the insects, this haiku by Roseliep is in keeping with the Japanese associations of fireflies with lovers. This is natural both as a common observation available in the early evenings of summer, but it also fits with our knowledge about why fireflies are illuminating themselves (to find a mate). In Roseliep's haiku the lovers and the firefly are both in a natural quest for love.

grass
holding the shape
of our night [30]

in darkness
20–20 vision of
finger on flesh [31]

love made,
twig
fire [32]

Not all of Roseliep's erotic haiku are set in outdoor settings. Sometimes the lovers are intimate by candlelight instead of moonlight and indoors, in the bedroom.

taking flame
from Sobi-Shi's candle

the beauty sighs [33]

by her bed
night enters
his boots [34]

Erotic haiku capture moments of intensity, such as “taking flame” which I imagine means that she blew out the candle. The sigh is a sigh of love. And in the second haiku, night enters his boots as the light goes out.

from Beauty’s bedroom
Sobi-Shi brings the moon
back to his own [35]

Again returning from “Beauty’s bedroom” the narrator of this haiku is light on his feet, bringing the natural light of moon, the lightness of the moon, the joy of knowing a lover back to his own bedroom.

love song

Near
as air [36]

Erotic haiku can capture the intimacy, the closeness of lovers, the way they share the air between their faces as they speak, perhaps sharing a pillow. It is a love song to be as near and as together as the very air they breathe. In this haiku Roseliep portrays another creator, an artist:

sculpturing
her lover
coming forever [37]

The artist creates his expression of erotic love by capturing her lover in a sculpture, in her art, at the moment of ecstasy, coming forever.

Soul Mates and Couples

While Roseliep succeeds at creating haiku of young lovers and erotic love, the majority of his haiku are about what the Greeks called agape, a pure, ideal type of love of the soul or spirit associated with long-term lovers or couples. Our contemporary expression for this kind of love is “soul mates” or life-long companions. Roseliep excelled at writing this kind of love haiku, in which the lover is full of joy just seeing or being with their lover. These are haiku about the joy of having love in your life.

mist
on my mouth
air you touched [38]

This haiku invites us to feel the mist on our face, the lightness of its touch, then to share the narrator’s joy of being connected with the lover, whose lips the misty air also touched. To know you have a lover brings a sense of connection with all things.

heart locket
its rise

and fall [39]

How simply Roseliep conveys both an erotic movement of the locket on a woman's breast and the long-term love it signifies: the place where she has locked a love away and keeps it always.

hold me closer, wife,
the plum blossom is so strong
on midnight air [40]

their small talk
after marriage
the wild strawberries [41]

In these haiku the lovers hold each other close, enjoy the scent of plum blossoms on midnight air, satisfy themselves with small talk, and accept the surprises of wild strawberries. The first is written as pure voice, from the husband to the wife. The other is by a third person looking over the marriage as a bystander. Both haiku take joy in the senses of smell and taste more than the passing words being exchanged.

early spring morning
wife still asleep —
the egg lady [42]

loving another
while still loving you
winter thunder [43]

autumn hike with you:
just the three
of us [44]

Even when meeting or being with others, the “you” of the lover goes too. In “autumn hike with you” the “you” is ambiguous, leaving it open to multiple interpretations: the “three of us” could be a coming child or autumn itself or the plural “you” of a couple. Relationships are never just two, and these haiku convey the pull of others and the carrying of the relationship.

earthshadow
on the moon:
mine on you [45]

We have seen the moon and moonlight in several love haiku by Roseliep. In this one the lovers are connected to each other just as the moon and earth are connected. The earth shadow on the moon in a union similar to the lover and his love.

pressed in concrete
her hand and mine
iced [46]

This haiku has the feel of an old “how we met” story, with the evidence pressed into concrete. It suggests a long-time relationship marked as a memento of the past. The fact that the hands are now iced, however, suggests that perhaps the fire and warmth is no longer there. Things are hard and cold

and no longer heartwarming for this couple. Nonetheless, the narrator in this haiku remembers the warmth and laughter of that day when they pressed their hands into the wet concrete.

autumn stillness:
the cracks
of your hand [47]

With autumn, things have lost their color and vitality. It is quiet; a stillness has settled in. The lover's hands are cracked but still admired and the object of this haiku narrator's contemplation.

our song
in the piano stool.
daybreak [48]

How simply this haiku conveys a long relationship. It is another silent haiku, a quiet daybreak haiku at home. The piano has the capability of bringing warmth and joy into the home. The haiku narrator fills the room with a favorite song in his mind, simply by knowing that "our song" is in the piano stool as sheet music. Maybe the narrator will fill the house with that special song. Or perhaps the knowledge of the sheet music in the piano stool is a sad memory of better times when the lovers were together, playing the song.

in snow the whisper
of my lover's footstep ...
or a bird's [49]

Here is another quiet love haiku where the narrator is enjoying the quiet of a new snow. He hears the muffled sound of footsteps or imagines it is his lover come to see him. Maybe it's just a bird. Either way, the whisper of footsteps in the snow means a companion is on the way.

rocking on the porch
the couple have nothing left
to talk about [50]

This is a long-time relationship. The haiku gives us the images of the couple on the porch, rocking silently with each other. Are they enjoying their silence with each other or do they not talk because of tensions that may arise again? Roseliep leaves the emotional significance for the reader to discern.

snow is whispering
through the garden's skeletons
and my lover's swing [51]

The garden is quiet with new snow, and the snow is the only thing alive in the garden. The plants are mere skeletons, and the lover's swing is unoccupied. The snow, however, is moving everything and whispering, but all the narrator hears is the absence of his lover.

white morning-glories;
my lover has taken
so long a journey [52]

What is this long journey? The return of the morning glories? How far away is the lover? Years? A passing on to another life? The white morning glories have just arrived and will be gone by noon, but the narrator is still thinking of the lover, gone for so long.

her lover's whistle
in the evergreen
above his grave [53]

Here the narrator is a widow visiting her dead husband's graveside. She can hear his whistle, his voice, the good cheer in his voice she lived with so long. The whistle of the wind in the evergreens may be the reality above his grave, but in her heart she still lives with the lightness her lover brought to her life every day. The memory of him continues to lighten her heart.

Let me end with this essay on Raymond Roseliep's love haiku with a haiku triptych, a three-stanza poem that brings nature, lovers, and God together in one creative spark of life and light and love:

after dusk

asleep
the firefly
is fueling

sparks
however small
light lovers

our bodies
listen
to light [54]

In "After Dusk" Roseliep invites us to see that love is a divine spark, a natural spiritual bonding, that "however small" those first sparks, the resulting light fills our bodies with the light of love. We should listen to this light that fills our bodies and let it grow into a lifetime of love.

Remember, from his poetics essay, Raymond wrote, "The poet is an animal with the sun in his belly. He is one breed of the species cited by Luke the Physician as 'a whole body ... filled with light' (11:36)... [H]e imitates the Creator. With language he puts flesh on ideas and feelings; to airy nothing he gives local habitation and name." His love haiku do not conclude with bitterness for lost love nor simply a longing for the romance of young lovers. He writes erotic haiku as natural celebrations of the power of love to bond lovers intimately together. His haiku celebrate soul mates who find life-long companionship and the accompanying joys of sharing a lifetime of love. Throughout his literary creations and with all of his personae and many haiku narrators, Roseliep celebrated the Creator and His abundance of love. The spark of creativity — compassion and love — shines through as a celebrated gift of light from God in Raymond Roseliep's love haiku.

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Notes

1 This paper was delivered at the "Cradle of American Haiku" Conference, Mineral Point, Wisconsin, Aug. 24, 2008.

2 *Bottle Rockets* 9:3 (February 2008), 74–86.

3 *Studia Mystica* 2:3 (fall 1979), 21.

4 *Delta Epsilon Sigma Bulletin* 24:4 (December 1979). A version of this interview was published in *A Roseliep Retrospective: Poems & Other Words By & About Raymond Roseliep* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Alembic

- Press, 1980), 13.
- 5 Raymond Roseliep. *Listen to Light* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Alembic Press, 1980), 87.
- 6 *Bonsai: A Quarterly of Haiku* 1:3 (July 1976), 13.
- 7 Raymond Roseliep. *Sailing Bones* (Ruffsdale, Pa.: Rook Press, 1978), 8.
- 8 Raymond Roseliep. *Love Makes the Air Light* (New York: Norton, 1965), 87.
- 9 *Frogpond* 1:3 (August 1978), 8.
- 10 *Sailing Bones*, 20.
- 11 Raymond Roseliep. *Rabbit in the Moon* (Plainfield, Ind.: Alembic Press, 1983), 43.
- 12 Raymond Roseliep. *Step on the Rain* (Derry, Pa.: Rook Press, 1977), 29.
- 13 *Love Makes the Air Light*, 85.
- 14 *Step on the Rain*, 19.
- 15 *Sailing Bones*, 12.
- 16 *Brussels Sprout* 2:4 (1982).
- 17 *Listen to Light*, 86.
- 18 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 30.
- 19 *Listen to Light*, 44.
- 20 *Listen to Light*, 30.
- 21 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 106.
- 22 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 16.
- 23 *Brussels Sprout* 2:3 (1982), 3.
- 24 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 56.
- 25 Rod Willmot, ed. *Erotic Haiku: An Anthology* (Windsor, Ont.: Black Moss Press, 1983), 35.
- 26 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 30.
- 27 *Frogpond* 6:3 (1983), 24.
- 28 *Frogpond* 1:2 (May 1978), 5.
- 29 *Frogpond* 6:2 (1983), 36.
- 30 *Frogpond* 4:3 (1981), 5.
- 31 *Frogpond* 2:2 (May 1979), 10.
- 32 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 56.
- 33 *Sailing Bones*, 14.
- 34 Raymond Roseliep. *Firefly in My Eyecup* (West Lafayette, Ind.: High/Coo Press, 1979), 13.
- 35 *Sailing Bones*, 14.
- 36 *Firefly in My Eyecup*, 7.
- 37 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 58.

- 38 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 31.
- 39 *Frogpond* 6:2 (1983), 36.
- 40 *Step on the Rain*, 12.
- 41 *Sailing Bones*, 9.
- 42 *Firefly in My Eyecup*, 4.
- 43 *Frogpond* 6:3 (1983), 24.
- 44 *Bonsai* 2:4 (October 19, 1977), 14.
- 45 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 79.
- 46 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 113.
- 47 *Listen to Light*, 71.
- 48 *Listen to Light*, 104.
- 49 Randy M. Brooks and Lee Gurga, eds. *Midwest Haiku Anthology* (Decatur, Ill: High/Coo Press, 1992), 84.
- 50 *Step on the Rain*, 32
- 51 Raymond Roseliep. *Sky in My Legs* (La Crosse, Wis.: Juniper Press, 1979), 43.
- 52 *High/Coo* 2:7 (February 1978), 14.
- 53 *Rabbit in the Moon*, 59.
- 54 *Listen to Light*, 39.