

A Tumbly Life of Haiku: Reading Robert Spiess *

by Randy Brooks

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Robert Spiess published his first haiku in 1949 in *American Poetry Magazine*, and he became a participating writer and eventually poetry editor of *American Haiku*, published by James Bull. In this essay, I provide a contemporary reading of Spiess's progression as a haiku writer, from his first published collection, *The Heron's Legs* (1966), to his last collection, *Some Sticks and Pebbles* (2001). This is but one of many possible readings that could be constructed from Bob's collection of haiku, and I have included many sample haiku with the hopes that readers will construct their own interpretations of his life's work in the haikai arts. This essay provides a chronology of his work through publications, with the exception of the very end, where I preferred to conclude with his special collection of writing featuring his playful Noddy persona.

The heron's Legs (1966)

Spiess's first collection of haiku, *The Heron's Legs*, was published in 1966 by American Haiku in Platteville, Wis. This chapbook of 52 haiku was bound with Japanese stitching in an edition of 335 copies. The book includes an appreciation for Clement Hoyt and Jim Bull. "As friends, fellow haiku poets and editors of English language haiku, they read the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions." The book opens with Buson's famous haiku:

In the evening breeze,
the waters lap against
the heron's legs.

which not only provides the title for the collection, but represents an ideal example of a haiku from a Japanese master. This is a beautiful haiku, full of sensory detail—the coolness of the evening breeze, the sound of water lapping against the heron's legs and shore. It is a haiku that establishes presence without the focus being on the self or the ego of the poet. It is a haiku that "puts us there" without dictating what we, as readers, are intended to think or feel.

This title haiku is an example of a common approach to form and style in writing English-language haiku in the 1960s. The translated haiku is

written as a sentence, following English punctuation conventions including a capital letter, comma for phrasing, and ending period. Note that this haiku is near 5–6–4 syllables, so it follows the short/ long/short line pattern but is not exactly the 5–7–5-syllable count approach. This translation also follows a natural conversational English phrasing, opening "In the evening breeze" and ending with a deliberate pause so the reader can take a moment to imagine and feel the breeze. Then it concludes with a second phrase broken into two lines "the waters lap against / the heron's legs."

When we turn to Bob's own haiku in the book, we immediately see that he does not follow the strict goal of observation and egoless perception exemplified in Buson's haiku. The first haiku, for example, includes an understatement about how we ought to respond to a passing skunk:

night fog on the farm:
the passing skunk's pungency
is not unpleasing

Other haiku place the poet or narrator within the action of the poem:

walking at the shore:
picking a sea-worn pebble
to hold in my hand

Bob even lets a little lowercase "i" into a couple of his haiku:

drifting into the room,
the milkweed seed distracts me
as when i was young

In these haiku he objectifies himself as the thing being observed:

from a hill i watch
earth's shadow eclipse the full moon
—my shadow, too

And in one haiku he looks at himself through the perspective of a fly:

at me with one eye,
and with the other the gecko
observes a fly

In several of the haiku, the poet enters into the interpretive space with a single word:

all water turned ice:
delicately a gray squirrel

is lapping snow

However, some of the haiku in *The Heron's Legs* maintain an egoless focus on perception without commentary or explicit interpretive expression by the poet. Spiess establishes a presence in most of his haiku without asking us to examine the images through his interpretive lens. For example:

autumn dusk and rain:
men dragging for the drowned boy
turn their boats toward shore

It should be noted that Bob's haiku in this first collection are for the most part not poems that focus on things in nature without a human presence. His haiku come from beaches, farms, and graveyards, but he is not writing from a perspective that ignores humans. The images may include lakes or ponds, but he celebrates people as well. For example:

all the skaters gone:
thinner now the midnight ice
across the wide lake

Several of the haiku include subtle spiritual associations, this one conveying Bob's interest in Buddhism:

watching each other:
the camouflaged young octopus
the better buddha

Bob's haiku usually follow short/long/short phrasing, with 5–7–5 syllables in all but a few. There is one four-line elegy, but the rest are written in three lines. He does not follow the sentence approach to form and style. His haiku are presented one to a page with no initial capital letter and no ending punctuation. He uses some punctuation within the haiku, primarily to mark the pause between phrasing in order to create subtle rhythms—some are abrupt breaks, some continuations, others slight hesitations, and still others barely a pause at all. In this haiku, Bob uses spacing to create a meaningful spatial pause in the third line as well:

paying last respects
gathered in small groups talking
the body alone

As I read through the collection of haiku, I realize that Spiess enjoys playing with language. He is a poet who likes the subtleties of word choice—extending the usual associations of a word through new contexts. And, as demonstrated in later collections, he likes making up new words.

as the dry ZZZzzz
of one cicada ceases,
another begins

Some of his playful observations of people rely more on word choice than scene:

atheist uncle
—backbone perpendicular
as the village priest

He also likes playing with phrasing and techniques of expression such as repetition:

old posts and old wire
hold wild grape vines holding
old posts and old wire

which invite the reader into not only seeing but understanding how the vines and the fence are in a long-term relationship of mutual support. Both have grown old together, and while the new fence once provided support for the young vines, now the old vines have grown strong roots and hold up the old fence which might collapse without the support of the vines. While this appears to be merely an observation or description of a fence and grape vines, the repetition of old and internal rhyme with hold create a sense of unspoken comparison with people—how we support the young ones who turn around and support us when we grow old. It is the human context of fences and grapes (wine) that bring in the sense of long-term human effort that underlies the observations of this haiku.

In this first collection, Bob Spiess demonstrated that he was a haiku poet with control of word choice, meaningful phrasing, and an understanding of the importance of crafting the pause in a haiku in order to shift or move the focus of perception to significance. He was not afraid to rely on observation nor to be playful with language in his work as a writer working in the emerging literary art of haiku in English.

The Turtle's Ears (1971)

Bob Spiess's second book was published in 1971 by Wells Printing Co. in Madison, Wis. This collection of ninety haiku was also bound with Japanese stitching, featuring one haiku per page and including *sumi-e*–style sketches. According to the title-page note, this book is a selection of haiku written on "twenty-two hundred miles of solitary canoeing on Midwestern rivers and streams." As the flyer for the book notes, "These are poems of pure experience in which all the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch manifest the animate and inanimate forms of

creation encountered by the author."

Although the majority of these haiku are moments of observation and perception from his canoeing perspective, the underlying feeling is that of peaceful acceptance and appreciation of life. These are haiku of being at ease out on the lakes and rivers—poems of not imposing his will or worries on the things experienced but rather passing by as an appreciative interloper in nature. These are haiku that take time to just be there. Here is the title poem:

Around the bend
a log lying in the stream
—the turtle's ears

Like the turtle on the log, Spiess is on the water, listening to what may come around the next bend. The water moves everything—the canoe, fallen logs, the turtle, the haiku poet. We hold on for a moment against the current, then give way to its flow.

Spiess notes more than just the beauty of nature; he witnesses relationships of the water to life, such as in this haiku:

The day after rain;
a reach of river bank
scattered with morels

For those of us who have enjoyed discovering morels to eat, this haiku conveys several relationships. It is hot today after a cooler day of rain. The ground is moist from the rain and swollen river, and the river bank is warm and shady, ideal conditions for mushrooms to thrive. Evidently, Spiess spies a good cluster of morels along the river bank. This is probably a hard place to reach from shore, but easily reached by canoe. I like the way he chooses the word "reach" in this haiku as a location, an area along the riverbank. We can easily imagine the canoe on the bank and the poet reaching for the morels for tonight's campfire supper. The morels are thriving and so is the poet.

In another haiku, Spiess encounters a wood duck's nest hidden in shoreline flowers:

Blue phlox on shore;
feigning a wound a woodduck
flaps down the stream

At first we think this is merely description of a beautiful scene—the flowers covering the shore and the duck flapping into the air. Then we realize, as did the poet, that the wood duck is trying to attract our attention away from the phlox (and the nestlings or eggs likely hidden within).

Feigning an injury is a survival strategy of birds, especially those that nest on the ground.

Spiess pays attention to signs of life—a tar paper cabin near the river, or evidence of a muskrat's feast from the night before:

River bank mud, —
a heap of pearly clamshells
that a muskrat left

There is a playful sense of serendipity to the haiku in the collection, a sense of wondrous surprise:

Hunting on a hill
for the spring on the map
... blueberries

I like how this haiku starts with "hunting" and the thing being hunted is a spring. The spring is on the map but not so easy to find in the woods or hills. This is an intellectual hunt from a document—a very human endeavor based on someone's previous record of the spring. However, he is obviously just as pleased with finding blueberries not on the map. Perhaps the blueberries are a better find than the spring. In another haiku, he finds ripe wild plums:

Landing the canoe—
wild plums in the summer sun
falling at a touch

He also notes evidence of humans along the rivers:

The river's wide bend;
a red and white fishing bob
in the willow leaves

Of course, there are dangers to be noted, as in this haiku of attempting to control nature with a barbwire fence:

A rocky portage
where barbwire crosses the stream
—the rattlesnake!

Here is a rough part of the stream, requiring the canoeist to carry the canoe over a fence blocking passage. This hot, rocky portage is a favorite spot for the rattlesnake to hunt for mice and other streamside creatures. Can you hear the rattlesnake in its name when the poet gets too close?

In the last of his *Speculations* (#858), published in *Modern Haiku* in 2002,

Bob writes:

Most haiku poets appreciate animals and celebrate them: their aliveness, grace, their perceiving of and egolessly living in the present. And well it may be that haiku poets are in touch with certain depths of themselves that reach far back in time, similar to our reactions to cave paintings, where we feel that the artists who depicted the animals felt kinship with them, as evidenced by the skill with which they rendered the animals in their various motions and activities.

Throughout *The Turtle's Ears*, Bob expresses the life of animals and their living in the present. One of the most interesting haiku is another turtle haiku that illustrates the "felt kinship" he expressed in his Speculation:

Upturned turtle shell;
 underneath my flesh
 a hundred bones

This haiku is intriguing because of the way the perspective moves from the upturned remains of a turtle to interior thoughts of the speaker's own mortality—flesh and bones inside our shell of skin. This haiku about "my flesh" represents an internal comparison that suggests lots of possible connections—it harkens back to an image of the upturned turtle unable to right itself. How are we stuck in our own flesh and bones, unable to "right ourselves" to a thriving, healthy life? What will remain of us?

When Bob died, I wrote this haiku for a memorial issue of *World Haiku Review* published in March 2002:

a turtle shell
turned over in his bed
the haiku he left behind

which celebrates his remains, his upturned turtle shell, not as a collection of bones but rather as his haiku which continue to be full of life and celebration of the living.

Two more favorites from *The Turtle's Ears* feature other riverside survivors who thrive at an old age:

Riverside tavern, —
 eighty, she still shoots pool
 —smoking a cigar

Floating past a shack, —
 an old man out in front

hanging up clothes

In this second collection of haiku, Bob Spiess writes with eloquence and simplicity of his discoveries, feelings, and observations on the rivers and lakes. He does not impose himself on nature, but responds to the surprises offered around each bend. He is not an alien, but a fellow earth-dweller who enjoys finding the animals and plants and other humans thriving along the waterways. He enjoys the animals and the remains of fellow adventurers:

The old swimming hole —
a rope swinging to and fro
in the autumn wind

Five Caribbean Haibun (1971)

Five Caribbean Haibun is Robert Spiess's third book, published in 1971 by Wells Printing Co. The flyer for the book promotes it as "the first book of original haibun in English" and it is certainly one of the earliest collections explicitly published as haibun. The 60-page book, with Japanese cord binding, features five haibun: "Anguilla Sojourn," "Fifteen Views of Grenada," "El Otro Puerto Rico," "Nineteen Views of St. Vincent," and "A Mosquito Net on Tobago."

In the flyer Bob offers a brief explanation of haibun in parentheses: "haibun (a combination or linking of prose and haiku poetry, often in the form of a travel journal)." *Five Caribbean Haibun* is a collection of travel haibun, including lots of haiku with very brief travel notes in prose. The poetry is in the haiku with few insights coming from the prose. The haibun are written as a sequence of haiku, usually based on chronology and travel. For example, "Anguilla Sojourn" starts with his decision to go to that island during winter and ends with a haiku about packing a facemask and snorkel for his trip. The prose and haiku are not among Bob's best work. The book is an interesting experiment, but ultimately the haiku do not rise above the tourist or guest perspective. Bob was not an expert on the history or culture of the islands he visited, so the book captures only the sense of being a tourist writing haiku about things he knows only from an outsider's viewpoint. Browsing the book is like looking at snapshots of someone's vacation.

A high valley path, —
the guide says that monkey
tastes better than goat

from "Fifteen Views of Grenada"

The Shape of Water (1982)

Ten years later, in 1982, Robert Spiess's fourth collection, *The Shape of Water*, was published by Modern Haiku Press. This saddle-stitched book is 48 pages and comprises 101 haiku and senryu plus a few additional poems. In this collection, it becomes obvious that Spiess is more comfortable with a broader range of form and style—writing haiku in one line, with fewer syllables per line, and often placing the verses in deliberate sequences. The haiku are rich in perception, insight, and innovative language:

Alleluia alleluia the frogs this Easter night

This one-line haiku moves from worship and song to the frogs, who turn out to be singing their own hymn on the renewal and resurrection of a spring night. With both the "alleluia" and "Easter" Spiess quickly transcends from the frog world to the human world, uniting them in a spiritual insight about rebirth. This is a collection of excellent haiku—unpredictable in focus, perception, or literary techniques.

Another haiku on death and renewal of spring:

A spring breeze rises —
breast feathers ruffle
on the dead sparrow

The sparrow is dead, yet the spring breeze seems capable of raising it to life again, at least in the ruffling of its feathers. With this juxtaposition we get both worlds—death and life—in one haiku. Here is another that demonstrates Bob's willingness to maximize the impact of the haiku through a new approach of expression:

Deer bones ...
rifle bullet
under the ribs

This haiku is minimal in focus and presentation. The deer bones are all that's left, but upon closer inspection there is a bullet under the ribs. We see into the deer, its end story, and its resting place. It is certainly a stark take on the integration of man and nature. There are other haiku in this book as well that demonstrate an awareness that man and nature are not always in a peaceful coexistence:

Meadowlarks!
— the farmer
poisoning gopher holes

Here we get the favored and not-favored wildlife. The meadowlarks are celebrated for their song, their beauty along the fences, and just for being there. Simultaneously, the farmer is weeding the wildlife by poisoning the

gophers whose holes are dangerous to livestock (and provide homes for rattlesnakes). Neither the deer bones haiku nor the poisoning gopher holes haiku should be seen as judgments about the humans involved—they present the results of observed activities. Spiess leaves the significance for his readers to construct.

In addition to broadening his topics and stylistic approaches, in this collection Bob enjoys playing with a broader range of voices and perspectives. Although in his book of haibun he talks about himself being foolish by eating a toxic fruit yet surviving, in *The Shape of Water* we meet this character:

Wind-swept pine, —
the simpleton laughs
at the summer moon

who reminds us of the drunken Chinese poets or the Zen adepts who enjoy a good laugh. Bob enjoys the spontaneity of this fellow and his laughter.

In a visual haiku—rare for Spiess—he gives us one of the shapes of water:

a square
of water
reflects
the moon

This book collects many of his experiments and new approaches at this time. Still, he continues to write excellent haiku that capture the life and nature of animals, such as this favorite:

Becoming dusk, —
the catfish on the stringer
swims up and down

It is the end of the day, a successful one for the fisherman, who is probably about ready to pack it up and head home. The darkness is settling over the water, and the catfish is still restless on the stringer. The up-and-down motion suggests the restlessness of a caged animal, in this case the reach of the stringer. Will the fisherman let the catfish go or take it home for supper?

Spiess also includes some minimalist haiku that are focused on moments of human suffering, loss, and related emotions. For example, from a hospital:

Intensive care ...
dials

fallen back to zero

which suggests the patient has died and the vital-sign machines are ready to be turned off. The perspective is of someone in the ICU—perhaps family or a health provider. Without interpretation, the voice of this haiku gives us the noticed dials in the context of the intensive care unit of a hospital. It's enough. In fact, it's all we need to know and feel the impact of being there.

In this collection we also get to see Bob's humble spiritual/religious self again in haiku such as:

Honeydew melons
in the store the priest and I
confess our greed

Autumn's red and gold —
my canoe partner
softly whistles hymns

Bob explores human emotions more fully in this collection:

A hate-letter ...
wood being chopped
the chips fall away

We can feel the energy going into each chop and admire the productivity of using that energy to get something done. Wood chopping as therapy.

The body of the book is arranged by season, followed by some haiku arranged by topic or location. A favorite end-of-winter haiku is:

Field of thawing snow —
a boy in muddy boots
flies a crimson kite

He includes four rhymed haiku, including this one:

Drifting in the skiff ...
names of all the swallows now:
tree and barn and cliff

The Shape of Water demonstrates a new range of experimentation with subjects, style, expression, and layout in Spiess's haiku. He is participating in the American haiku community's exploration with variation in the literary art of writing haiku. He continues to be playful with words, now reaching into expanded territory of emotions and human contexts beyond

the rivers and lakes of his earlier collections.

The Bold Silverfish and Tall River Junction (1986)

In 1986 Modern Haiku Press published *The Bold Silverfish and Tall River Junction* in a simple saddle-stitched edition that includes seventy-nine poems on fifty-two pages. This collection is dedicated to "R2" —i.e., Raymond Roseliep, who died in 1983. The first half of the book title comes from a haiku:

Winter illness
the book's silverfish
grows bold

This is both an excellent haiku about a silverfish and about Bob recognizing his own mortality following the death of his haiku colleague, Father Raymond Roseliep. The silverfish comes out of the book, intuitively aware that the book's owner is too slow, too feeble, to be dangerous. It is an old treasured book but it is teeming with living creatures. Ah, I like this haiku as a title poem for Spiess's collection—which boldly steps out with fresh approaches! The silverfish is a little buddha, who, like the poet in winter illness, finds sustenance and life in a musty old book.

The Bold Silverfish and Tall River Junction continues Spiess's discovery of new approaches to writing haiku and senryu. The focus in this collection is more on people than in his previous works, witness this haiku:

The roshi's talk —
his wonderfully
big ears

Soft rain —
someone with an umbrella
over the squatting puppy

These haiku observe people with compassion, not judging them but appreciating how wonderfully alive they are. Again:

The fisherman waits ...
again a wren's refrain
comes from the willow

He sees a fisherman waiting, which is, of course, what fishermen do. In this case, however, he is not waiting for a fish to nibble on his line. He is waiting for the wren to start up again. Perhaps he has come near the nest and is getting a scolding from the wren. Whatever has happened, it is clear

that he is enjoying this catch of the day.

In another haiku the perspective is about "making lunch for refugees," but the insight comes as compassion for a hungry child:

Making lunch for refugees —
my back turned, a child
picks through the garbage pail

In the first section, *The Bold Silverfish*, many of the haiku deal with things aging, growing old, falling apart—the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*.

A week of rain —
the rotten-wooded willow
burgeons with leaves

Inky caps ...
grandpa alone recalling
the elm that was here

The second haiku has both a sense of loss and the vividness of the stumps that remain. Only grandpa remembers the beauty of the streets lined with elm trees before the disease took so many. He is a survivor.

Bob notes the impermanence of things in this minimal haiku:

ice cubes
aging
in each one's glass

Here is a favorite among the wabi-sabi haiku:

Casting off the lines —
odor from the wooden wharf
of drying dew

It is loaded with fragrances—the wet wood, the drying dew, the smell of the ropes, as the boat heads out onto the morning lake. Another favorite:

Blueberries
in a bowl on the steps —
monarch fanning its wings

I like the heat of this haiku—a hot sunny day for picking blueberries. The berries have been picked and set on the porch steps. I see the setting as a farmhouse near the blueberry patch. A monarch has landed on the blueberries, perhaps to sip some of the dew lingering on them. The butterfly is not in a hurry, but fans its wings ready to fly at once if necessary. Unspoken in the haiku is where the blueberry picker has gone

—perhaps out to the garden for some more harvest or on to other chores. When they return, they will take the blueberries inside. Meanwhile, the monarch butterfly gets to enjoy them as an attractive resting place.

The second half of this collection, *Tall River Junction*, is a collection of senryu (Spiess never makes an obvious distinction between haiku and senryu in his books, but I consider these to be senryu) about the characters and personalities of a small river town. Similar to Edgar Lee Masters's book of epitaph poems in the *Spoon River Anthology*, these senryu are quick character sketches, with the subject's suggestive name and role presented as a title. These are literary creations, and Bob has fun naming his characters:

Olga Hooton, Gossip

None other replies,
as again and again
the screech owl cries

Olga "Hoot"on, likes to hear the sound of her own voice. No one needs to reply; she goes on and on with the latest gossip. Unlike the technique in Spiess's haiku, the hoot owl in this senryu is merely a symbolic means of representing Olga's nature. The owl is not there, but Olga's gossip is real and she goes on and on screeching like an owl.

While the first half of this collection demonstrates a continued exploration with approaches to writing haiku in English, these senryu are all written in 5–7–5 format with rhyming first and third lines. They also have titles. In style these harken back to Spiess's work in the 1960s, and they remind us of some of the creative senryu of Bob's colleague among the editors of *American Haiku*, Clement Hoyt, in his 1966 book *County Seat*. Bob's senryu are playful, literary creations, employing rhyme, pun, metaphor, stage voices, and other poetic devices. Here is one, for example, that includes a double-rhyme:

Clarence Meeker, Bookkeeper

An office job's rut —
all he talked about today
his thumb's paper-cut

These character sketches are intended to be fun and provide insight into human nature, as all good senryu do:

Marcella McDermott, Beautician

The present shall pass,
and you can see it going
—in the looking glass

Like the poems in the *Spoon River Anthology*, the overall effect is to paint

a literary portrait of a small town through the fragmented poems of various characters who give us an overview of the community. In *Tall River Junction* Spiess uses senryu to construct a fictional community. The senryu are not written from the perspective of the various characters, but are written by an insider within the community—giving us the insider's scoop on each person's life and values.

Jock Studley, Logging Crew

Landlady out of sight ...
but a neighbor sees the girl
that stayed overnight

Other than the fact that he notices what the characters say and do, the narrator stays out of these character-sketch senryu. He does not judge, condemn, or praise the characters. He merely observes, summarizes, and presents them as members of the community. However, there are a couple of characters he likes to portray with certain curses or appropriate afflictions:

Maj. Quentin Calley, Army Engineers

His eczema itch:
to make the wild, winding stream
as straight as a ditch

And he seems to admire the compassion he portrays in the priest who gives voice to the majority of this senryu:

Fr. Augustine Confesso, Parish Priest

Smiles, 'The pear you eat,
snatched from my tree, neighbor boy,
be it doubly sweet'

Only one character is nameless because he is not really a member of the community:

——- ——-, Transient

Wino, trembling some —
a quarter to a buddha
presently a bum

Interesting that it is this nameless one that the narrator writes about with compassion, and recognizes as a buddha. Perhaps this is the only character who is like the haiku poet, a transient passing through this river junction town. He may be a wino and trembling in withdrawal, but he is also an egoless bum, not hung up about who he is. Altogether, Spiess writes 46 senryu about 40 characters, ending with a senryu about the river itself:

Tall River, Itself

It rushes, — it gleams, —
a joy to all who collect
rivers and streams

It is clear that this final poem is really about Robert Spiess, the avid canoeist who liked to collect rivers and streams, especially the life found there, including the interesting variety of characters he creates in *Tall River Junction*.

The Cottage of Wild Plum (1991)

Robert Spiess published *The Cottage of Wild Plum* with Modern Haiku Press in 1991. It is a perfectbound collection, consisting of 68 pages of haiku and senryu. In form and style, Spiess continues to explore a variety of approaches, with several haiku in this book published in five or more lines, sometimes with just one word per line.

crescent
moon
a
bat
loops
and
twists
among
wild
plums

Most of the poems in this collection emphasize spiritual awareness and insights, especially related to Buddhist perspectives about the connectedness of all living creatures. Spiess deliberately places his collection of poems within the context of living among the wild plums and enjoying the sacred gifts of that existence. As he states in the opening poem:

forbearing
to take a branch
in flower,
i bring you songs
of wild plum

And near the end of the collection, on page 67, he talks about how "In Buddhism there is a striking allegory of how infrequent is the chance of obtaining birth as a human being." Spiess goes on to say, "Almost needless to mention, as human beings we should be most grateful for our form of life and not waste it on trivial pursuits, but live wisely. — But what if one is a poet, a painter ..." introducing these key final poems:

to gain
 human birth
is rare!
 profligate,
i watch
 bees tipping
wild plum!

Twenty-six of the haiku include the phrase "wild plum" within a variety of contexts. Often the wild plum provides a fragrance, suggesting a wonderful atmosphere of celebration of life. He writes seven haiku of spring at "The Cottage of Wild Plum" including this one:

from somewhere
 the flooded stream
bears along
 a flowered branch
of wild plum

This haiku is about unexpected gifts, the power of a spring flood, and the lightness of the flowered wild plum, which is beautiful even in the midst of the surging water. He includes eleven haiku of summer, fall and winter at "The Cottage of Wild Plum," such as:

mallards
 waddle from
the creek —
 and settle
to sleep
 underneath
wild plum

Ah, to sleep beneath the wild plum. To come out of the busy creek and rest in the shade of the wild plum. Those fat mallards have it pretty good. Another haiku seems to enjoy catching children stealing some plums:

thinking
they're
unobserved!
youngsters
are
snitching
the
wild
plums

followed by this poem:

[In the manner of Wu Chen]

you found

my cottage —
tell them
'a bookworm
lives there
in midst of
wild plum'

This poem harkens back to the bold silverfish coming out from the book. In this book Spiess creates an extended allegory of his life of poetry as a life of living in the midst of the wild plum, a life of living at "The Cottage of Wild Plum," as expressed in this haiku, also among his last series:

a life near its close —
and still foolishly scribbling
poems of wild plum

The very last poem of the book reads:

orioles
begin to flute —
i crumple
in shame my songs
of wild plum

In these wild plum haiku, Spiess is comfortable referring to himself in the first person, with a lowercase "i," the same as he does throughout his senryu written from the perspective of other living creatures in his series "Twenty Voices," which features various creatures expressing their own buddha nature.

In "Twenty Voices" Spiess continues his "Tall River Junction" senryu experiment. These twenty poems are written in the same style, with 5–7–5–syllable rhyming lines containing numerous puns.

However, in this new series the poems are all written from the perspective and voices of various animals. Each is written as the animal's prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator, expressed here as "Lord." Instead of titles, each senryu starts with a bracket indicating which animal is praying:

i
[saith the ant]

'Lord, through life i lowly pass —
but you hear my footsteps
among the grass'

The use of the archaic word "saith" suggests that these are intended to be sacred praises from the animals to their creator, a sort of sacred text created from each animal's gifts or spiritual nature. This is an unusual and interesting literary construct of persona for senryu, especially insofar as senryu are supposed to be about human nature. Spiess creates senryu about

animal nature, written in a very human voice. Is this excessively anthropomorphic? It is certainly creative literary art. As we have seen from his very first book, Spiess enjoys trying new approaches and techniques even when the form appears very old fashioned.

vii

[saith the weasel]

'My instinct to kill
more chickens than i can eat —
O Lord, such a thrill!'

I'm not sure what to make of some of these senryu. Is this a confession from the weasel, or simply an expression of joy over killing chickens? If we take it from a human perspective, the weasel seems like an evil murderer, killing just for the thrill. From a weasel's perspective, he is thanking the Lord for being a weasel driven to kill for the thrill of killing. Or perhaps Spiess is saying that killing is a part of human nature as well and is bemoaning our inborn urge to kill and seemingly endless capacity for doing so.

The kingfisher's prayer is more in keeping with human values, like Native Americans thanking the Creator for a successful hunt:

vii

[saith the kingfisher]

'Lord, i dive and dive —
grant me a fish now and then
that i may survive'

In another senryu Spiess plays on the way Issa gave voices to creatures in many of his haiku, perhaps thinking of the Japanese master's famous haiku about being there for the lean frog:

xix

[saith the frog]

'Though i am merely
a frog, Lord — do you, as Issa,
love me dearly?'

As in the *Tall River Junction* series, the buddha shows up, this time in the form of a slug:

xvi

[saith the slug]

'So poor, i live a nudist
and eat but plants — being
Pure Land Buddhist'

This and the final senryu do not address the creator as Lord. Verse xx breaks out of the senryu form to celebrate "the Law: All entities ultimately shall be quit of ignorance and realize their own buddha-nature: the least stalk of weed, the last remaining denizen of the deepest pit of Hell. How

wonderful! How wonderful!" which is followed by the last senryu:

xxi
[saith a dry stem of grass]

'Even I, a straw,
am not overlooked
in Buddha's wonderful Law!'

The conclusion of the series shows that Spiess intends these senryu to allow all living creatures, even the straw of grass, to sing praises of its own sacred, Lord-given, buddha-nature.

Some Sticks and Pebbles (2001)

Modern Haiku Press published Spiess's last collection, *Some Sticks and Pebbles*, in 2001. The title comes from a three-haiku sequence about things in mud:

i
ice covers the pond:
frogs with barely beating hearts
burrowed in the mud

ii
reeds emergent
from the mud —
ripples touching their tips

iii
some sticks and pebbles
and a place with mud —
a child by himself

This short sequence celebrates mud as a source or location of vibrant life—the keeper of barely beating hearts of frogs preparing to hibernate until spring, reeds sprouting out of the mud in the spring, and a child with all the elements necessary to create something out of the materials at hand. The last haiku suggests an anticipation of creativity—what fun the child will have with those sticks, and pebbles, especially in a place of mud. Like the haiku poet, this child by himself has all he needs to create.

Some Sticks and Pebbles includes a variety of poetry, including quatrains, short free verse, a few haibun, and mostly haiku in three lines. There is a playful variety of haiku, including some written one word per line in a vertical presentation and one visual haiku of a "crushed turtle shell nearly across" [the highway]. Bob also wrote a "Han-shan's 'Cold Mountain' fare," a quatrain with four vertical lines, one for each season. There are also senryu such as:

neighbor's moving sale —
here a wrench, there a pliers
i had forgotten

In addition to haiku from his ongoing canoe journeys, Bob also continued

to write about spiritual issues, especially related to Buddhism:

walking for my heart ...
so many little karmas
beneath a step

This haiku shows Buddhist compassion for all living creatures, and also awareness of the fragility of life and that all living creatures share in suffering. He is out walking to help his heart become healthy, which I also take as keeping his spiritual life healthy—perhaps almost doing a walking meditation with chanting or prayers. And he is stepping on ants or other little creatures.

heavy rain ...
sheltered by the drooping head
of a great sunflower

Here we see a playfulness as well as quiet acceptance of the heavy rain by the sunflower drooping its head. It's a wonderful haiku because of its presence and the playful language of the narrator's voice. It is not merely a descriptive haiku about a sunflower in the rain; it is a haiku in which the "great sunflower" is celebrated as a source of shelter with its large, umbrella-like "drooping head." The sunflower is a fellow sojourner, not merely a thing in the garden. The voice becomes even more playful, perhaps even mischievous, in the following poem:

heavy night rain —
hmm ... one *could* shortcut
by breaking through his prized hedge ...

Bob enjoys the voices in his head, sometimes the spiritual voice considering the karma of ants and sometimes the ornery voice tempting him to break through the neighbor's prized hedge. As these haiku and senryu show, Spiess understands the power of images and the importance of voice as necessary elements of the art of haiku. He also enjoys being playful with allusions to other haiku from the past as in this one:

a rose of sharon —
by luck viewing it before
basho's horse comes by

The Robert Spiess Memorial Issue of *Modern Haiku* magazine, published in autumn 2002, includes an e-mail interview by Michael Dylan Welch entitled "The Haiku Gatekeeper." One of the most interesting questions Welch asked was, "In the thirty years since you became associated with American Haiku, how do you think English-language haiku has changed?"

Spiess answers:

Perhaps the most obvious change has been in the increased use of much freer forms or structures for haiku instead of the formal or classic 5–7–5 syllabic pattern. Also, haiku have

become tauter, fewer words; there is less syllable-counting. There is more experimental work, such as concrete haiku, but these often tend to be tours de force rather than genuine haiku.

I believe there are relatively fewer haiku being written that are merely similes or metaphors, and also less anthropomorphism, pathetic fallacy, personification, and so forth. The subjects in haiku are more diverse—the city, persons, the homeless, poverty, destruction of the environment, social concerns, and many others—there are still too many haiku that are only recordings of stimuli or just journalistic or scientific descriptions.

This describes Spiess's own development over this time period—moving from a fairly traditional syllabic pattern and subject matter derived primarily from his canoeing to a broader range of forms, structures, and subject matter.

Noddy (1997)

Robert Spiess published his next-to-last collection, *Noddy*, through Modern Haiku Press in 1997. It is a perfectbound book, consisting of 64 pages of haiku and senryu. Here Spiess continues to play with form and narrative voice in his haiku and senryu. As he says in the preface, "Most of the poems herein are haiku and senryu, although some have a nontraditional architecture for these genres." He enjoys explaining the title: "The 'noddy' who appears in many of the poems seems to some to be an eccentric, even a sort of booby; while others wonder if he is not fulfilling his life by according with the two sides of his nature: that of the student of both the manifest and the transcendent, and the humorist." Therefore, it is clear in this last collection that Spiess is quite comfortable with his playful approaches to both form and voice.

He also explains his playful approach to organizing the book into sixty-four pages based on the sixty-four hexagrams of the I Ching—"Jung's concept of synchronicity or meaningful chance." He explains that "In turn I took a poem at random, considered its content and mood, and assigned it the name of the hexagram that best suited the poem; then eliminated both from further use. I was amazed that even toward the end of the matching—even the last poem accorded with the name of the only hexagram left." So here is the opening poem introducing his creative Noddy fellow titled The Creative:

gently odd
a 'noddy'
in tumbly digs
trying words
mumble mumble

The noddy is both subject and voice in this opening—a self-aware poet mumbling to himself, looking for words and not very concerned with his

social appearance. He lives in a house of words.

a cicada rasps again —
and again the baby
shakes her rattle

This haiku is titled after the hexagram for accord and focuses on two other sound creators—a cicada and baby with a rattle who are making music together. The "again" is what shows the two are in sync with each other. They are listening and responding to each other's music—they are in accord.

For the hexagram for Standstill Spiess shows that his poet's character extends to his simple house and life, his "digs":

someone
wants the digs
picked up —
the noddy
replies
it's home when
tumbly

Our noddy poet is at home with himself and his tumbly life. He likes being at home rather than picking up his digs for someone, even a visitor.

In another haiku he celebrates a small visitor—a cat that wanders in and makes itself at home.

she's made herself
queen of the digs
the stray kitten
that strolled right in

This is the kind of visitor our Noddy enjoys and welcomes. These poems convey a playful spirit of surprise with celebrations of serendipity, which means this Noddy fellow enjoys the lightness of being alive. He also welcomes fellow music makers:

windows open
an oriole's fluting fills
the tumbly digs

Noddy is also a man who knows the rivers and marsh:

crossing
the footbridge
a glimpse
of 'Wily'
the trout
that no one
can hook

He admires the legendary trout, too wise to be caught, comfortable in his own digs beneath the footbridge.

Unlike one of his visitors who "still / owes a loan" our Noddy seeks to rid himself of attachments, but he does love his books:

year by year
throwing out
save for books
to keep it
tumbly here

This tanka-like poem is matched to the hexagram Stripping Away, which shows that Noddy has been trying to simplify his life by ridding himself of possessions and interests except for his love of books, which he embraces as the tumbly life.

He has several poems recognizing that others—especially creatures—have found and live full lives in their own tumbly digs:

marshside's tumbly digs —
at midnight moonlit mallards
still softly jabber

Noddy has an affinity for fellow creators, especially the mumbly kind! Evidently this noddy fellow gets criticized for being out of touch or odd. In the one-word-per-line poem under opposition he pleads:

don't
crankily
oppose
noddy's
being
aloof
wrens
are
warbling
now

Not his last poem, but certainly one of the most beautiful, this shows his joy in gifts that show up unexpectedly:

noddy's narrow digs—
on a thin twig of plum
a wren sings his joy

Spiess's collections of haiku chronicle a tumbly life of mumblings—of a haiku poet seeking and becoming at home with his life of books near the marsh. His collections include spiritual journeys into Buddhist insights of life and suffering and an understanding of the connections between all living things. They include his appreciation for simple folk who live along the rivers of Wisconsin. They include his travels to the Caribbean. They

conclude with a playful acceptance of himself as an odd Winnie-the-Pooh type of fellow who likes books as much as Winnie likes honey. Always willing to experiment and try new approaches to writing haiku and related poems, Spiess concludes his creative work with a fun self-awareness of himself and his own creative mask, our loveable Noddy who lives a tumbly life of haiku poetry in his simple digs full of books. It is our honor to visit his tumbly digs through his collections and to admire the wild plum blossoms, where a wren sings for joy!

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