

**Piercing the Mountain:  
An Interview with Ruth Yarrow**

Michael Dylan Welch, Sammamish, WA

Imagine hearing a haiku about a water ouzel or a loon, followed by whistling or whooping in imitation of that bird's sound. Imagine the poet's pursed lips, trilling tongue, or occasionally flapping arms. Imagine poem after poem recited this way, each one dramatized with precisely imitated birdsong. Poets in the Seattle area have had the privilege of witnessing this performance numerous times. They have heard a haiku poet who knows her birds, and knows her nature: Ruth Yarrow. Her poems about plants and animals or hiking in the old-growth forest of the Pacific Northwest—which Margaret Craven called “the greatest forest in the world”—demonstrate not just a deep knowledge of the earth and its flora and fauna, but an irrepressible love and respect for it, too.

Ruth Yarrow's passion for haiku and the natural world has unfolded for more than forty years. This passion extends to activism, working for peace, justice, and environmental causes. She has written remarkable essays focusing on the intersection of haiku and senryu with socially significant subjects, such as labor, war, and nuclear disarmament. She's lived in Ghana and Costa Rica, and in places closer to home such as New Jersey, upstate New York, and Seattle, where she has influenced countless others on two coasts—and worldwide through her haiku publications—with her quiet dedication to careful seeing in her natural world. That seeing has included her family and personal relationships, too, and she's written some of the best motherhood haiku yet written in English.

Ruth and I knew each other before we both moved to the Seattle area, and for decades I read her poetry in the leading journals. I recall a memorable day in San Francisco when I played tour guide for her and her two children when they were visiting from New York. I vividly remember more recent nature walks she led at the Seabeck Haiku Getaway—including the way she had

us arrange a set of autumn leaves by color on black pavement or showed us insect marks on the bark of a tree, or uncommon mushrooms under forest duff. I also recall workshops she gave at the Haiku North America conference and elsewhere, her nature-focused watercolor paintings and exhibits, and her gracious commentary on haiku shared at monthly meetings of the Haiku Northwest group in the Seattle area. Occasionally she asked to use a poem of mine in an essay, or wrote to offer an appreciation for this poem or that. I know she made connections like this with many other poets and environmentalists as well.

For all of Ruth's love of haiku and the people who write them, what matters more is the earth they celebrate. When Haiku Northwest was given the opportunity in 2008 to perform haiku at the renowned Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection near Seattle, she spoke up against it with polite vigor because the collection is owned and operated by the logging giant Weyerhaeuser, whose environmental practices she opposes—her principles came before haiku. Indeed, beneath her soft-spoken exterior lies a fierce pacifist, a thoughtful activist who finds haiku to be an extension for her beliefs about the natural world.

Nor is she afraid to paint dark pictures as well as light. In "Ruth Yarrow: American Haiku Master," a story in *City Living Seattle* published in 2010, Mike Dillon quotes Ruth as saying, "There's a danger writing a lot of sweet haiku, to . . . think one can't encompass the whole human experience."<sup>1</sup> In a 1999 *Frogpond* essay on environmental haiku, Ruth states that "the power of haiku in helping us focus on natural beauty is one reason the form attracts so many adherents in this time of environmental crisis. . . . But if we only cling to the un sullied nature we want to see, our haiku can become naively romantic."<sup>2</sup>

On July 12, 2015, the American Haiku Archives advisory board (which I'm on) appointed Ruth Yarrow as its nineteenth honorary curator, a richly deserved honor. This appointment recognizes not just the strength of her realist haiku, but her essays, commentary, workshops, and gentle leadership in haiku circles. In late 2014, before this appointment was

deliberated, I thought to interview Ruth about her history with haiku. She may seem like a quiet poet, but she's been a steady one, a poet whose work deserves to be more widely appreciated. In 2013, that appreciation was given a boost when she was a featured poet in the landmark anthology, *Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in English-Language Haiku*. In describing her work, editor Allan Burns says that Ruth is "among the most acclaimed haiku poets of [her] generation." He notes that, because most other anthologies have featured her domestic haiku, "Yarrow's nature-oriented work has not typically been emphasized in her selections in anthologies," and that, "As a result, there has probably been less recognition of Yarrow's achievements as a first-rank nature haiku poet than might be expected."<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, the Seattle Office for Human Rights, the Seattle Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations Association of Seattle honored Mike and Ruth Yarrow as "Distinguished Citizens for Human Rights." For Ruth and her husband, haiku has been an extension of deep-seated beliefs that can move mountains, even if haiku can't. Ruth Yarrow, now in her 77th year, is a poet who is pierced by mountains—and pierces them in return, becoming one with her environment.

**Michael:** How did you first come to haiku?

**Ruth:** I do write poetry in other forms, but I've written many more haiku. I got hooked when I was teaching a course at Stockton College in southern New Jersey in the mid '70s on how cultures around the world express their attitude about the environment in their literature. I realized how little I knew about the literature of Asia, and because I had a vague recollection that haiku was a poetic form including nature, I delved into it. Since I asked my students to try writing haiku, I had to try too—and didn't stop.

**M:** Do you remember your first haiku, or at least an early one? How about your first published haiku? Please talk about these poems.

**R:** Two of my first haiku were:

evening sun through reeds:  
shadow rings slip up and down  
at wind speed

moonlit okra leaves  
floating in blackness  
no one sees the stems

These were observations from a local marsh and my backyard garden where we were living in northern New Jersey. I was struck by the mysterious feeling of the sliding rings and invisible stems. I was tickled when they were chosen to go in the “Watersounds” section of the second volume of *Frogpond* in 1979.

**M:** What were some of the most influential books you read on haiku, both very early on in your practice of haiku, and more recently?

**R:** Back in the early 1970s I assigned Harold Henderson’s *Haiku in English* to my students, and depended heavily on it myself. Then I found Cor van den Heuvel’s first edition of *The Haiku Anthology* and was very excited to read that a new haiku magazine, *Frogpond*, was being launched. I marked which poems I thought were good submissions to *Frogpond*’s “Croaks” section, waited eagerly for the next edition to see which of the judges agreed with me, and submitted my own efforts. More recently I still value Cor’s revised anthology. Makoto Ueda’s work has stretched my concept of what haiku can be.

**M:** You’re well known in haiku circles for also being a naturalist. Please describe your background as a naturalist. How has this informed your haiku?

**R:** In the 1950s I attended and taught in a rigorous nature study camp in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. That led me to choose Antioch College for its strong environmental education program (as well as its leftist politics, co-op job program, and wild folk dancing!). I taught science with the

Peace Corps in Ghana, and then earned a Masters degree in ecology from Cornell University. That enabled me to teach field ecology at the college level and to work as a naturalist in environmental centers. People of all ages light up as they recognize the call of the tufted titmouse or predict where sensitive ferns will be growing, and I thoroughly enjoyed helping them connect with the natural world. I find when you're attuned to the natural world you connect it more easily with your own emotions, and that helps haiku happen.

**M:** What advice do you have for haiku poets who are not naturalists? Is it still possible to write strong nature haiku without being schooled in botany or zoology, or being an avid birdwatcher?

**R:** Of course! It's the awareness that's key, not whether you know the species name of a frog or the sex life of green algae.

**M:** Tell us about your books, and how they came to be. Do you have more in the works?

**R:** My first book, *No One Sees the Stems*, 1981, was chosen as a High/Coo mini-chapbook. My second book, *Down Marble Canyon*, 1984, from a wonderful raft trip with family in the Grand Canyon, was selected by *Wind Chimes* as a minibook. My third haiku collection was requested by a poet connected with Crossing Press, to form a blank book titled *A Journal for Reflections*, 1988, where every other blank page featured one of my haiku. My fourth, *Sun Gilds the Edge*, 1998, was chosen in the Saki Press contest. My fifth, *Whiff of Cedar*; I put together with the help of a local printer in 2007, alternating wilderness haiku with Seattle-inspired ones. Eventually I'll work on a collection of my strongest haiku. I have usually done my own calligraphy and, except for *A Journal for Reflections*, have illustrated each of my books with line drawings or watercolor.

**M:** You are also known as an activist for causes relating to peace and environmentalism. How does haiku connect to these causes?

**R:** I believe haiku can connect to every aspect of our lives. That's why I keep writing articles that I hope will nudge people to write haiku about their experiences and emotions around issues beyond the usual, including work, environmental concerns, economic inequality, the threat of radioactivity, and war.

**M:** Is it ever appropriate for haiku to have an agenda, such as promoting world peace or saving the whales? What is the best way for haiku to do that, if at all?

**R:** Having emotions about an issue shouldn't be written off as having an agenda. I think it's just as appropriate in haiku to share your feelings about climate change as about cherry blossoms. However, I don't think it's easy to write effectively about issues that people label as political, especially in this country. Writing haiku is not the same as creating a bumper sticker. A good haiku about an issue that people might feel is political is one that subtly conveys your feelings while linking it to your experience. Here are a few examples.

About working and economic inequality:

dirt farmer's wife  
at the screen door—  
no tractor sound                      Randy Brooks, *Midwest Haiku Anthology*, 1992

About the environment:

standing on a stump  
the land developer  
in green shades                      Peter Yovu, *Haiku Compass*, 1994

About nuclear weapons:

a newsman explains  
the neutron bomb's effect  
   supper cools  
   Michael Dudley, *Counterbomb Renga*, 1983

About the U.S. war in Iraq, experienced through photos, by  
Dean Summers, 2003 (privately published):

a woman's anguish  
in her arms  
something bundled up

bright spring morning  
in the rocks above the village  
a sniper adjusts his scope

**M:** Tom Clausen, your fellow Ithacan, has said he discovered haiku after reading an article about you in the *Ithaca Times*. Please tell us that story, and anything else you can about Tom and his haiku. He has emerged as one of the standout poets writing haiku in English today, and he owes much of his poetic beginning to you. How does that make you feel?

**R:** Tom says the article was a profile about me around 1988 after the *Reflections* book was published. I am pleased that he says my haiku

after the garden party the garden

was an instantaneous awakening for him that a very short poem could be powerful. He immediately checked out and bought books on haiku and his early efforts grew into a lifelong interest. I don't claim to have mentored Tom, but greatly appreciate his work, and now that I've moved back to Ithaca after eighteen years, I've enjoyed reconnecting with him again. I find his work especially impressive because he's a person who finds it really easy to speak and write a lot of words and yet he is fine poet of this succinct form.

**M:** Who has mentored or influenced you over the years? What are good ways to learn haiku, both for yourself and others?

**R:** Geraldine Little invited me to her home when I first began to publish and was wonderfully supportive. A bit later Elizabeth Searle Lamb did the same. Like hoards of other haiku poets,

I thrived with the gentle rejections (“almost!”) and wise suggestions (“could you omit this word?”) of Bob Spiess. I’ve led numerous haiku workshops and hope they have helped people enrich their lives by being more aware of those momentary fleeting emotions. The best way I’ve found to learn haiku is to read a lot, think about which haiku you like and why, and keep a small pad of paper nearby so you can jot down those juicy small experiences. Then write, share, send some poems in for publication, and don’t be discouraged when they get rejected. (My card files are full of the notation “rej” for rejected.) It also helps, as in the Seattle area, to have folks like Francine Porad, you, and others who have energetically organized groups of haiku poets so we can share our appreciation and suggestions with each other and enjoy the humor and camaraderie that result.

**M:** In 1997, you moved from Ithaca, New York, to Seattle, Washington, a radical change of scenery. What prompted your move, and what do you appreciate about the Pacific Northwest for the sake of haiku?

**R:** When our daughter Delia graduated from high school, and our son Matt from college, we had an empty nest. We’d always loved backpacking in wilderness, especially the mountains in Washington State, so in our late 50s we landed jobs in Seattle. I worked for Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility, educating the public about the dangers of the contamination at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, and my husband Mike for Western Washington Fellowship of Reconciliation, organizing for peace and justice. Mike launched and we helped lead a Peace Activist Trainee Program for high school students for fourteen years, graduating more than ninety terrific young people. And now I’m back in New York. When Mike died in 2014, both our children and their families had already moved back to Ithaca, so the pull of family and old friends and now a new granddaughter lured me to join them.

**M:** Mike was a peace and justice activist, although not as prolific a poet as you. Please talk about Mike and what haiku meant to him.



**R:** Mike wrote some haiku about the world of Appalachian coal miners and I wish he'd written more. Here's one:

lighted Pepsi sign  
old miners basking  
in the dim glow

Mike Yarrow, *Modern Haiku*, 1982

Mike started me on another kind of poetry project. His dissertation was based on more than 200 interviews he and I (mostly he!) completed with Appalachian coal miners, men and women, and their spouses. Before he died, he started finding free verse in some of the interviews. I've continued that work when I'm not caring for our delightful nine-month-old granddaughter, and this September Bottom Dog Press published our book *Voices from the Appalachian Coal Fields: Found Poems*.

**M:** What sort of legacy would you like to be remembered for? What issues are on your mind?

**R:** I hope to be remembered for being a good friend with a sense of humor, and for helping to organize and connect people working for peace, justice, and a healthy planet. These issues are definitely on my mind. When our baby granddaughter is my age, it will be 2090 and I can hardly imagine the challenges the planet's inhabitants will face then.

**M:** Robert Major, a fellow Pacific Northwest Quaker, published the following poem in *The Heron's Nest* (4:8, August 2002):

silent Friends meeting . . .  
the sound of chairs being moved  
to enlarge the circle

Could you talk about your religious or spiritual beliefs, and how they relate to haiku and activism in your life? What are some of your most important values?

**R:** Fine haiku of Bob's! I believe that there is a Great Spirit or whatever you call it in each person, and that the earth that sustains us should be treated with love and respect. This makes

it imperative that we work to end war and inequality and the plundering of the planet. In short, we need to treat others as we would like to be treated, and the earth as we would treat our own future generations, because they will be part of it.

**M:** Do you see haiku as a Zen art, or does that not matter to you? Why or why not?

**R:** Haiku is a Zen art to many people. I certainly don't know enough about real Zen practice to say that my haiku comes out of that tradition. As a Quaker, I meditate. As a watercolor artist, I especially revere the beauty of the natural world. So I guess I share some of the approaches and values of Zen practitioners.

**M:** Please pick a few favorite haiku by other poets and comment on those poems.

**R:** The waves now fall short  
of the stranded jellyfish . . .  
in it shines the sky

O. Mabson Southard, *Marsh-Grasses*, 1967

This poem seems to capture the beauty of a natural death. The waves so subtly recede; the sky reflects in the jellyfish in a soft way.

distant thunder—  
the dog's toenails click  
against the linoleum

Gary Hotham, *Against the Linoleum*, 1979

I love the drama of the (I assume small and nervous) dog reacting to an approaching storm, through the contrast of the deep rolling sound of far-off thunder and the sharp click of the dog's toenails underfoot. For some reason I can't explain, the word linoleum is so much more evocative than just the word floor.

toll booth lit for Christmas—  
from my hand to hers  
warm change

Michael Dylan Welch, *Frogpond*, 1995

It crossed my mind not to pick your haiku, Michael, because you're interviewing me! But I've always loved the many contrasts in this haiku—the lighted booth in a dark December night, the cold of winter and the warmth of the change from her hand, my assumption that this person might be of color, so coins from a dark hand to a whitish one, the special connection we feel in this season even in a mundane exchange like this, and the hope in this season that hints at a warm change in the tensions of the world.

**M:** How do you distinguish between haiku and senryu? To what extent does this matter?

**R:** I find senryu give you that jolt of emotion, often humor at the human condition, while haiku resonate longer and more deeply. But I don't think it's worth spending much time trying to categorize our work.

**M:** What advice on haiku might you have for beginners? What do you wish you had known early on that you didn't learn until later?

**R:** Enjoy reading, writing, and sharing haiku! Know that dry spells happen, sometimes for quite a while, and then the inspiration will come again.

**M:** What advice on haiku might you have for experts, or those further along the haiku path than beginners?

**R:** The same as for beginners!

**M:** To wrap up, please pick ten of your own haiku that you think of as your favorite or best and say something about how they came to be, or why they're special to you.

**R:** Five older ones, from the incredible experiences of having children and of backpacking in wilderness:

warm rain before dawn:  
my milk flows into her  
unseen

snowmelt:  
the toddler stirs her reflection  
with one mitten

a marmot's whistle  
pierces the mountain  
first star

canyon:  
at the very edge  
riversound

touching the fossil—  
low rumblings  
of thunder

These haiku almost wrote themselves. The warm rain and my milk seemed to resonate, as did the marmot's sharp whistle and the star pricking through the night sky. A friend asked me about the connection between the fossil and the thunder and I couldn't clearly explain. It is something about the drama of evidence of life from so long ago and the drumroll of thunder—it happened just like that. Our little daughter squatting over a puddle moved me because she was so lovable. The Black Canyon of the Gunnison was so steep and deep that I kept trimming words to capture that.

Five from our years in the Pacific Northwest:

I step into old growth:  
autumn moon deeper  
into sky

planting peas  
the earth curves under  
my fingernails

against the wind  
we hold the peace banner—  
our spines straighten

food bank line—  
a pigeon picks up crumbs  
too small to see

crowded bus through fog—  
someone singing softly  
in another language

Old growth is truly majestic and creates an environment that seems to expand in every direction. Crouching to plant peas, I could feel the curve of the huge earth under me and see it echoed in my grubby fingernails. If you are looking for haiku that you could say have an agenda, you might put the last three in that category. But I hope they feel deeper than bumper stickers.

**M:** I'm glad you shared that early poem about the marmot's whistle, among so many other memorable poems. Did you know the marmot poem was one of two poems you wrote in my haiku autograph book on August 26, 1992 when you were visiting San Francisco? In having people sign that book, I always asked them to pick a favorite or best poem. Why is that poem so important to you, and still significant to you now?

**R:** I wrote the haiku about the marmot's whistle on one of our early mountain backpack trips, on a clear evening, just as the first stars were pricking through. It was a moment when I felt jolted into connecting the sharp sound and the sky-piercing star. It's the kind of moment when you feel really alive, one of the joys in being in wild places.

**M:** What's an ideal day for you? An ideal life?

**R:** I'm having some pretty ideal days, taking hikes in wildflower-carpeted woods with an infant granddaughter in a front pack and my family close by. Good grief, Michael, an ideal life in a sentence? How about a life on a planet that is cared for, not raped for profit or power, and with everyone in our species having enough to eat and wear, sufficient healthcare, housing, education, and community? That would be an ideal life.

## Notes

1. Mike Dillon, "Ruth Yarrow: American Haiku Master," *City Living Seattle* (October 2010), 12.
2. Ruth Yarrow, "Environmental Haiku," *Frogpond* 14.3 (Autumn 1999), 23–24.
3. Allan Burns, ed., *Where the River Goes: The Nature Tradition in English-Language Haiku* (Ormskirk, United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2013), 172, 394.



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