

**Lit from Within** by Ruth Yarrow (2016, Red Moon Press, Winchester VA). 150 pages, 6×9", perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-936848-68-3. Watercolor artwork by Ruth Yarrow. \$15 from [www.redmoonpress.com](http://www.redmoonpress.com). All profits go to Southside Community Center, Ithaca NY.

*Reviewed by Cherie Hunter Day*

“My heart is by now in its rightful place, in proximity to my hands, which are made to reach out, as I write, to all those around me.”

–Alice Walker

As part of a college course she was teaching in the early 1970s Ruth Yarrow asked her students to write haiku as a way to connect with the environment. She tried the form as well, and what began as an exploration of nature writing became a life-long pursuit. *Lit from Within* is a collection of over two hundred of her favorite published haiku across the years from the various localities where she has lived and worked.

Her journey begins in “North: Upstate New York and Canada.” The haiku that opens the collection is one for which she is best known, and it remains one of her favorites.

warm rain before dawn  
my milk flows into her  
unseen

This haiku is as powerful today as it was when it was first published in 1981 (*Cicada* 5:1). I nursed my son, and my memory of that experience is still fresh when I read this haiku. Yarrow was completely present to the intimacy of that moment, listening with her whole body. The haiku validates a deeper knowledge—ancient, benevolent, and earth-wise—and was particularly affirming to my own haiku journey. She granted permission to see every moment as an opportunity to listen, learn, and witness. Her stance was inherently generous and inclusive. Love is the

quiet heart of activism. And we still have 208 more exceptional haiku to consider in *Lit from Within*.

She draws a steely strength from her Quaker background and has put that pacifist resistance to the test. Readers can feel her conviction, but the haiku are roomy enough for us to enter and draw our own conclusions.

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

riot police face us—  
just above the tension  
a gull floats

Yarrow's use of sound in her work is particularly keen and well-wrought. Here are two examples from the "South: West Virginia to Costa Rica" section:

mountain evening:  
below the fiddle music  
thunder

tropical night surf  
each crash and hiss  
phosphoresces

In the first example the focus is outward. The fiddle music is layered on top of the much more primordial sound of thunder. In the second example, sound has entered the words. The hissing sibilant sounds in "crash and hiss" and "phosphoresces" imitate the surf. It is also interesting to note that in the pronunciation of the word "phosphoresces" the sound registers just ahead of the meaning of the word. The delivery is biologically accurate. The tiny dinoflagellates need the surf's agitation to shine. It is this level of detail that makes Yarrow's work special.

Yarrow is an avid birder and a number of her haiku are about

her feathered friends. She knows them not only by name and habitat but by their songs as well. One of my favorites is:

stalking the grouse—  
his booming vibrates  
all my hollows

The Haiku Foundation Lectures recorded a YouTube video of Yarrow reading her bird haiku at Haiku North America 2015 at Union College in Schenectady, New York. In between each haiku she makes the appropriate bird call. It's a delightful and unforgettable presentation ([youtu.be/vuVSt6Om2aw](https://youtu.be/vuVSt6Om2aw)).

"West: Kansas to Washington State" is the final section in the book and the remaining compass direction. Here her haiku reflect her love of camping and hiking with ample examples of the nature-centered haiku for which she is also known.

canyon dawn:  
a bat folding dark  
into a crevice

rounded boulders  
the mountain torrent  
around them

The title haiku is the very last poem in the book. A full-color watercolor by Yarrow depicting this scene graces the cover and brings the reader full circle.

dome of stars  
under it, a small round tent  
lit from within

Educator, activist, and naturalist: Ruth Yarrow is all these things and one of our finest haiku poets.