

Global Haiku: Reader Response Essay
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 4 November 2020

Her Bird Song: Haiku of Ruth Yarrow

Ruth Yarrow first caught my eye more than halfway through *The Haiku Anthology* (1999) (the third edition, edited by Cor Van Den Heuvel) with her use of vivid, confrontational images and decisive spacing. Initially, I was aspiring to find an author to study that wasn't a white, cisgender, straight man. Immediately, I found a great connection with Yarrow and her outlook on haiku. Her work reminds me of my work, and she often plays with conventions not seen in haiku frequently, which is something I look for in haiku of all periods. What is even more interesting is when I looked into Yarrow, I saw that she had a background in biology and was a researcher. I wasn't expecting that, for sure! In my mind, the stereotype of a haiku poet is much like the great haiku poet Issa, wandering the countryside to achieve enlightenment and create art. In this modern time, however, we all have something to contribute to art, even biologists. She is also a mother and frequently writes about her children and the idea of motherhood, a great edition of the female viewpoint to the world of male-dominated haiku. Yarrow is also a watercolor artist, something as finicky and practiced as haiku. Her vision not only comes alive in her words but in her art as well. You could describe her as well-rounded and a firecracker at the same time.

Yarrow is just another example that haiku can come from anyone, anywhere, and be masterpieces. What makes Yarrow a great haiku poet is her unique outlook on life. She disobeys writing about only conventional haiku topics, thinking out of the box—all while using em-dashes, my favorite punctuation. She has found her form. As I discuss later, there is a certain rhythm to a Ruth Yarrow haiku, yet she is always there to surprise the reader, and after reading her haiku collections of *Lit Within* (2016)—one filled to the brim with black and white watercolors—and an earlier work, *No One Can See the Stems* (1981), I hope to incorporate some of her playfulness and wit into my haiku. Looking into these collections, a reader can find an incorporation of nature and human behavior, much in the lane of a biologist's study, but also one of social, environmental, and political activism. Yarrow isn't afraid to get down and dirty with the unsettling moments in life as well as the tranquil. Her balance of writing about both is what makes her entire work compelling.

moonlight —
 a path of dark grass
 leads to the snowman

Yarrow, No One Sees the Stems, (18)

This haiku has stuck with me the longest since I started reading her work. She is the haiku queen of unconventional images, but these images never seem estranged from collective human emotion. Haiku, as we discussed in class, is tapping into our shared experience, the feelings we rarely talk about but most all experience. There are conventional images that we attach to this feeling—dew drops, a calm pond, a fluttering butterfly—but they have become conventions of the art form of haiku. Yarrow indeed does discuss some of these images, but she always has a unique turn on them. This haiku is a great example of her conventional haiku: a singular image to start the reader out (followed by an em-dash), then another image that often creates the feeling of motion or dissonance, and then the third line that reveals the final image. We are first introduced to moonlight by itself—the cold wash of feeling, the solitude. Then we notice a path of grass... then a snowman at the end. It's almost as if we were meant to be led there. The slightly melancholy feeling we experienced due to the emptiness of the night is now colored with nostalgia and childlike wonder. I imagine a small child rolling a snowball across a path until it is big enough, then creating the body of the snowman. Moonlight has shrouded this scene in silence, but there is still an echo of fun. There were still people living there. Yarrow, like all great haiku poets, includes a hidden feeling in their haiku that you have to explore in greater depth.

our teen out late —
 through his window
 Orion

Yarrow, Lit From Within, (21)

Right away, I see a window pulled up and open on a clear summer night, light curtains fluttering with the summer night's wind. Yarrow comes in to check on her teenage boy and wish him goodnight, only to find that he snuck out, presumably, through the window. There is room for a parent's frustration or malice at being disobeyed but instead, Yarrow comments on the constellation of Orion. Like the stars, her son is far away, free and untouchable. He is at the same distance away from them (at least in this allegory) as the stars. There is a wild feeling to this haiku, something that comes up in many Yarrow haiku. It presents a new approach to haiku about motherhood not often discussed. The process of becoming independent has been the most straining on my relationship with my parents, yet it comes out of nowhere. Parenthood is often looked at from a point of dependency, where it is easy to want a baby and care for that baby. The difficult part is when that baby becomes more and more their own person. It creates tension in the home—I presume almost every home with this relationship—and yet I haven't read as many haiku about this struggle as I have about babies or toddlers. What amazes me more is how Yarrow responds as if she could never be upset with her son. Yet in later haiku she prides herself on her forms of rebellion and inner strength. Her son is finding the feeling of freedom away from the people he has depended on his entire life, and her quiet pride shows. Perhaps she too went through this phase of rebellion as a teenager. I love how the second line is phrased—"through his window" is very active and lively. How she capitalizes Orion also denotes the importance of the stars to the poet. It could also be the boy's name, a description of how he exited his room through the window. Yarrow is comparing her son to the constellation, with each commanding her awe and admiration. This haiku also follows the classic Yarrow format: subject (with em-dash), a second line full of motion, and the third line contextualizing the first two.

warm rain before dawn
 my milk flows into her
 unseen

Yarrow, Lit From Within, (11)

This haiku is the first in *Lit From Within*, accompanied by a drawing of a naked child facing away from the reader. It is all smooth lines and movement, the child lifting their foot as if to run away on pudgy limbs. In comparison to the last haiku, this exploration of motherhood is much softer (like the painting itself) and intimate, relishing in the bond between mother and child. This haiku follows the Yarrow format yet brings a lot more context to the first line than usual Yarrow fashion. Right away, we are placed in our setting with active descriptors—yes, it is raining, but the rain is warm, and it is still nighttime, edging the breaking of the day. It must be summer in this description, a groggy mother trying to lull her baby back to sleep after feeding them every three hours all night. The breast milk is like the rain as the second line of the haiku seems to draw a direct comparison. Rain and mother's milk both give life, and warm rain is comforting and sleepy, reflecting the mood of this poem. The last line: unseen. This isn't necessary to understand what is going on in the haiku but still contextualizes nonetheless. It's hard to believe that this milk is flowing yet there is the internal feeling of movement, of energy passing from mother to child. This haiku is a great example of nature and human action being written together as congruent—something is happening, you can't see the rain nor the milk—but they are there. This haiku is motherhood in the absence of the physical, more a leap of faith. There is the same adoration and relationship between mother and child in this haiku as there was in the last, but they represent different aspects of the relationship.

evening
 our paddles dip
 into liquid sunset

Yarrow, Lit From Within, (63)

Yarrow has many, many nature haiku that are remarkable in their own way. I, however, preferred (and collected) haiku surrounding more unconventional topics for discussion. With that being said, this nature haiku is my favorite. Even though there is no em-dash, this haiku follows the conventional Yarrow set-up. We are introduced to evening... not night! The sun is setting, the heat lingers, and the day is seeping away slowly. If it were night, the air would already be cold, and the moon would be high in the sky. This is just one example of the particularity a haiku needs to paint a specific picture. The second line introduces motion quite effectively with the specificity of each word creating an image: “our” “paddles” “dip” all denote something. Yarrow is not alone, is on a water vehicle of some kind, and is carefully moving forward with the motion of the paddles. The second line, right away, creates a connection to another person, a setting that provides context, and a feeling in that setting... all in three words! And I can’t gush enough about the phrase “liquid sunset”. The softness of “evening” expands throughout the whole haiku, all the way to the feeling of the sun on the water. And we are catapulted “into” the third line, a feeling of tension that juxtaposes the calm of the first two lines. The sunset, I imagine, is touching the watery horizon, giving Yarrow the impression of its rays melting into depths and spreading to her boat. In this haiku, there is no great ‘twist’, no crazy juxtaposition, yet there is still dissonance in the poem—the pull between day and night, water and sky, human and celestial. This quiet tension in the haiku, as well as the memorable imagery, make it my favorite nature haiku of Yarrow’s.

crowded bus through fog —
 someone singing softly
 in another language

Yarrow, Lit From Within, (79)

Now, this is my time of haiku. The relationship between people is so interesting—how we interact is something that transcends language and can only be communicated through shared thought and experience. It is almost like there is gravity between bodies and minds. And on top of that, transportation through the rain is a feeling like no other—I think of the early morning airport trip with my parents when I was little, the school bus ride home while it storms, the metro on a gray morning into the city. The whole experience almost feels otherworldly, like you are the subject of a coming-of-age movie. In Yarrow’s haiku, the indents on the second and third lines help create this feeling, painting an image where a person singing is in the distance, their mind removed from the crowded bus. And yet there is this sense of captive silence, where this person—humming, singing softly—is unaware that everyone on the bus is listening to them. Or, on the other hand, people are bustling about and talking on the phone and with each other, and the singer is the only one paying attention to the musicality of the rain. I love the second image, but I appreciate how each person could interpret the meaning or context differently. No matter what, I love the last line, laying on the final image with grace. It’s almost saying that if you listen closely, you can hear the differences in the singing that make it distinguishable from English. That’s often the most difficult part. English sounds like a lot of other languages because of our shared use of vowel sounds around the world, and as someone hard of hearing, this strikes especially true. Yarrow is good at this type of haiku, although they come less frequently in her collections. She approaches them with the same grace and attention that she does her nature haiku, but these often have an underlying layer of ferocity.

his remark
 she scrubs the counter
 in tighter circles

Lit From Within, (80)

Speaking of ferocity, this haiku is teeming with barely-bottled-up rage and frustration. Yarrow is a feminist (one of the reasons I chose her to write about) and her haiku discussing women and society are poignant. Many people, especially minorities and women, can attest to the feeling she is bringing forth in this haiku. There is a physical sense of motion in all her haiku, and what is special about this one is the potential energy as opposed to kinetic energy that creates a sense of tension. We begin with ‘his remark’—unsaid, the words this person could’ve said could be anything, so we move on to the next line. ‘She scrubs the counter’ is a very different action than what came before. There is a difference in the action that these two subjects are doing, and it informs their relationship right away. Are they in an intimate or familial relationship (dating, married, siblings, family, etc) or are they strangers? And the final knell caps off the tension with ‘in tighter circles’. God! This haiku is so interesting in the way it is set up by Yarrow. I imagine a waitress in a diner with some man passing through making a pass at her or saying something insensitive. The woman can’t say anything because her sticking up for herself could put her in danger. Instead, she takes out her anger on the table she is washing. This is extremely relevant to today, as I write this—November 4th, 2020. A man is blustering about while in power and people are afraid to speak up because it could put them in danger. We are all feeling this invisible tension, this frustration, this pent-up rage that we can’t express. And yet, we are left unresolved. Soon, that potential energy will become kinetic. And Yarrow wrote these haiku throughout her career, starting decades ago. This issue is not going away any time soon.

my thumbprint
 on this thousand-year-old pot
 fits hers

Lit From Within, (118)

This is another feminist haiku that I love but on a completely different branch of emotion. In classic Ruth Yarrow fashion, we begin with a statement of a subject—“my thumbprint”. These words are intentional, and there is a difference between the wording of ‘thumbprint’, ‘fingerprint’, ‘hand’, or ‘finger’. A thumbprint is something deeply personal, a physical mark of our unique bodies. No two fingerprints are alike, and the thumb is the most dexterous and important offshoot of the hand. My mother is an occupational therapist specializing in hands, so you can imagine the lectures my siblings and I got as children about why we shouldn’t slam doors—the movement of the hands and fingers is extremely important to our autonomy as a person. Have you ever tried to type or pour coffee or take a shower with injured hands? I have, and it’s the worst. Hands are very, very important. So, when I first read this haiku, I was immediately pulled in by the idea of the hand, especially the thumb. We move to the next line, starting with an active word: “on”. We imagine Yarrow’s thumb on the ancient piece of human history, tracing and following the indents. We finish on “fits hers”. We are all of a sudden introduced to a new subject in a way that is very interesting and unlike most haiku, I’ve read. This woman is gone, a ghost, and yet she and Yarrow have this special connection through the pot. How we know this pot belonged to a woman, we don’t know. Perhaps Yarrow doesn’t even know, but she imagines this person and finds kinship in her physical mark on the world. They fit together. While the previous haiku discussed the collective anger of an oppressed body, this one explores the kinship of women through the etches of time. I think they are a great comparison of feminist theory and an exploration of the female unconscious.

greenhouse —
 inhaling the breath
 of ancient bonsai

Lit From Within, (127)

Yarrow is a big fan of nature as she is a biologist, so she studies plants and animals with a precision that translates well into the particularity of haiku. She uses ideas and words that convey her exact feeling, enough to stick in your mind over many of the haiku we've read in-depth this semester. She brings life to many situations, like a stifled bus, the empty field with a snowman, and plants and animals. This haiku, once again, follows her conventions in beginning with a singular subject with an em-dash, then introducing movement, and finally contextualizing the life she's brought to the poem. We begin with a greenhouse—quiet, humid, only the feeling of sticky air on your skin and the whir of the A/C in the background. In that circulation, the plants move slightly, and if you look at them a certain way, they seem to be breathing. This is something I noticed when I sat for hours in the greenhouse at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, waiting for my friend to get done with her advising appointment. It's so odd to think that these forms of life are alive yet so different than us. Yes, they are not sentient, but they are growing and changing just like us. Yarrow writes about nature that way as if it is like us and we are like them. The way she refers to the feeling of breath is just superb. There is this tension again with the held breath of the subject, the exchange of life between beings. Nature and humans are symbiotic in many ways, but the breathing process is the reverse of each other. I also love the wording of 'ancient' bonsai, like it is almost a religious experience for the subject. Bonsai trees also hold great importance to the Japanese, a hint to the nature of haiku itself. Both in the words and about haiku's Japanese roots, this is the most zen haiku of Yarrow's.

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

Lit From Within, (96)

light
 up under the gull's wig
 sunrise

Lit From Within, (101)

And in closing, I will compare my favorite pair of haiku in Ruth Yarrow's work. I could discuss them separately, but I think it's better to use them as a couple to present the feeling of Yarrow's haiku. They represent one moment after another, carried on the image of a gull's wing. What is interesting is that I read more on Yarrow in an interview with Michael Dylan Welch for *Frogpond* (2015) about her start and mindset with haiku. She often writes haiku that "...imitates birdsong..." and that "... no one knows her birds like Ruth." She often compares herself to birds, finding kinship in their species. The first haiku of my comparison concerns the raw anger Ruth Yarrow often discusses, with the critical indent of the second and third line that is often found in the haiku. Even so, it doesn't follow the exact layout of Yarrow's common haiku but is within the lines. The action is presented right away in the first line. With all of that chaos, on the indent, a gull floats above the protestors and in the reader's mind. There is another great crash between human action and nature. Seagulls represent opportunity and scrappiness, something the protestors possess.

At the end of *Lit from Within*, the second haiku listed (also about gulls) is the last haiku of the book. These haiku are not paired within the book itself, but they are obvious pairs. The scene has now traveled from the human standoff to the float of the gull's wing. This haiku, in comparison with the first, follows the Yarrow haiku set-up. Yet there is one difference that stands out to me. The third line and singular word 'sunrise' is indented on an odd number of spaces between one- and two-tab clicks. Sunrise is fitted perfectly under the

gull's wing and also under the second line of the haiku. The curve of the gull's wing, in my mind, perfectly frames the horizon so that the rising sun is just peeking through. Once again, life and nature are interacting, but this time, with a shred of hope. These haiku flow into one another like a chain of events and yet represent the good fight morphing into a new world.

This is my favorite of her 'justice' haiku, her pent-up rage from the previous writings spilling over into rioting. This is intentional, as well. Yarrow says that she believes "... 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." Haiku, like other forms of art, can be used to protest. In some ways, it is one of the best forms of protest, because it takes the action off the streets (which doesn't last forever) and etches it into our media, our entertainment, our societal knowledge. Coming from Minneapolis, Minnesota, I know that George Floyd's impact is permanent because of the spread of art through the Twin Cities. Miles away from where he was murdered, from where I too stood face to face with riot police, I walked across the street to see a mural of murdered black Americans coming up in the suburbs. Art makes sure we don't forget, don't become complicit. Art outlives us and shapes the next generation of people.

In conclusion, Ruth Yarrow possesses knowledge of life and struggle that resonates with the collective human experience, just as varied and unique as the rest of us—a mother, painter, biologist, activist, poet. She is part of a group of people who recognize the power that they have and channel that through their art, making it an outreach of their activism. Yarrow is not one for the empty-headed haiku. She argues, again in the Frogpond interview, that the significance of haiku is "... helping us focus on natural beauty. . . . But if we only cling to the unsullied nature we want to see, our haiku can become naively romantic." True beauty is in the dissonance, the tension that strings human action and nature together. Her haiku, as a result, has weight. Yet her work isn't weighed down with pessimism. She contains all the negative emotions that come naturally to us and juxtaposes it with the bliss of a snapshot, a moment that reaffirms our trust in the goodness of humanity. We need that kind of art, one that is neither one thing nor the other. We also need artists and people in the spotlight who can adapt and be truthful. Ruth Yarrow provides readers with this example, a hope that illuminates beyond her paperback poetry.

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