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# Keeping Watch: The Practice of Poetry

BY MARGARET R. YOCOM

*The purpose of poetry is to remind us  
how difficult it is to remain just one person,  
for our house is open, there are no keys in the  
doors,  
and invisible guests come in and out at will.*

— Czeslaw Milosz, “Ars Poetica?”

*[E]ntrance into the liminal is fundamental to the  
life of writing. . . . In the work of such a person,  
what lies beyond the conventional, simplified, and  
“authorized” versions of a culture’s narratives  
can find voice.*

— Jane Hirshfield,

*Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*  
(Hirshfield 1997, 205)

“Ask yourself a question,” friend and poet Jennifer Atkinson advised me this spring when we were talking about ways of inviting poems to come. “A question for which you have no answer.” I nodded, thinking of my fieldwork in Maine. I have plenty of questions like that. Could my poetry writing help me explore what is just out of sight, and beyond understanding?

I’ve been writing poems since the third or fourth grade. I covered a dress box from The New York Store—then a big department store in my Pottstown, Pennsylvania, hometown—with silver and white wrapping paper and pasted pictures on it that I’d cut out of greeting cards: a smiling tawny cat and more. Plays, poems,

and stories—everything went in that box. I gave poems as gifts to my relatives: Aunt Gladys got “I Am a Sailor,” about my imaginary trip to the Arctic. And my entry to the fifth-grade “Why My Pops is Tops” poetry contest won my father a pair of dark magenta silk pajamas with robin’s egg blue piping that he still wears. But I’d never shown my poetry to anyone who also wrote poetry. To poets.

That changed around 2003, when I began to wonder if this were my last decade of university teaching and, if so, what would I like to learn from my colleagues before I leave. Poetry, came the answer. I joined our faculty women’s poetry writing group, and I signed up for Jennifer’s “Forms of Poetry” class. I asked folklorist Amy Skillman to join me in founding the Folklore and Creative Writing Section of the American Folklore Society, and I organize panels that bring folklorists and creative writers together at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conferences. It has been an excavation of the heart, like calling back some treasured friend who was set aside and almost lost.

My poetry has quite naturally turned to the natural world and the people of my major folklore fieldwork area—the western mountain and lake region of Maine—where I have been writing about the Richards, a family of loggers and

homemakers, woodcarvers, storytellers, and knitters, as well as about others in the community: hunters, river drivers, schoolteachers, and more. The challenges of doing fieldwork in logging country, in a town of twelve hundred souls about 40 miles from hospitals and other services, also claims its space in my writing, both of poetry and ethnography.

When I first started my long-term project in 1985, I took poetry with me to read in the evenings. I loved the stories I was collecting from Rangeley people; I was deeply drawn to work in the timberwoods, to carvings that poured from jackknives and chain saws, and to women’s knitting. But poetry helped me recall those parts of myself that I felt slipping away—the me who loved literary conversations, honored feminist ideals, and held to Quaker practices. So, no matter how tired I was, I opened Adrienne Rich’s *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, Christopher Howell’s *Though Silence: The Ling Wei Texts*, and other favorites.

Now I see that poetry has been with me throughout my fieldwork time in Maine. Early in our friendship, Rodney and Lucille Richard introduced me to their friend Gaylon “Jeep” Wilcox, a poet of verses that celebrate Rangeley and more (see Yocom and Wilcox 2000). And, when the Logging Museum—founded by the Richards—



Sunrise on Greenvale Cove, Rangeley Lake, 2004. Photo by Margaret Yocom.

established a Loggers Hall of Fame, we gave each honoree a framed copy of Oregon logger Buzz Martin's song "Where There Walks a Logger, There Walks a Man." Writing poems about my fieldwork area, though, feels like inviting people in to a room whose heavy door I've kept shut.

Opening this door, though, has its gifts: writing poetry has become, for me, a way beyond observation, participation, and interview to explore questions that haunt me, ones to which I will never get answers—or not very full answers. Sometimes my questions are ones my consultants in Rangeley seem to have; I hear such questions in statements they make over and over, with ritual intensity, as if trying to name something whose full name keeps slipping away or needs to be just out of hearing. Sometimes my questions turn to my own life in these mountains, this other home of mine.

Why, for example, I've asked myself,

do some women in Rangeley love to hang out their wash at the first sign of winter's passing, when clothes will actually dry outside and not just freeze? Yes, as they tell me, the laundry smells fresh. Yes, the air whispers Spring! But it's cold in March, in the mountains, and that cold makes itself known through red, chapped faces and hands. Is there more? Something unsaid? Something there on the margins? Like poet Renée Ashley, I am "drawn to what flutters nebulously at the edges, at the corner of my eye—just outside my certain sight." As she writes about what she wants in a poem, she speaks to my practice of poetry as an ethnographic lens:

I want a share in what I am routinely denied, or only suspect exists. . . . I long for a glimpse of what is beginning to occur, both in the margins, the periphery of the poem, and in a life. . . . [I want poems that are] a means to suspect or intuit the consequences

of what we do not know. . . . I need to see some movement from the corner of my eye and get curious, want to know what it might be, what fleeting, unnameable, shapeless-but-in-motion thing—acknowledged but uncertain—is skirting my certainties. . . . (Ashley 2007, 60)

So I start in to poems, now, writing what comes. As William Stafford observes, "Sometimes a path opens in language; you follow it as it goes, like a plan. It guides you where you wanted to go, but didn't know you wanted to till it happens" (Stafford 1998, 6). And in writing a poem, I discover what I think. Sometimes the narrator is me. Sometimes I climb into someone else's skin, or I try to, and use "my body as a fieldwork instrument," as Barbara Myerhoff counsels in her film *Number Our Days* (Myerhoff, 1976).

In "First Wash," I found myself writing in the voice of a woman; I tried to



William Richard carves a white cedar fan tower at the Maine Festival in Brunswick, August 1985. Photo by Margaret Yocom.

step away and let her talk. I used words anchored in western Maine, my fieldnotes, and my memories. For Lucille Richard, to do laundry is to do “a wash.” It’s “the wash” where I come from in the Pennsylvania German country, where my mother carefully hung the shirts to catch the wind like wet sails. And I remembered driving with the Richard family when a clothesline of towels on a windy ridge caught my eye—the weak March sun behind them, colors glowing, nonetheless. Lucille and I both turned our heads to watch, our only words: “Ohhhh.”

Similarly, Rodney, Sr., and Rodney, Jr., both like to tell people how William, their father and grandfather, respectively, carved his fan towers until his nineties, and how his hand would shake “something terrible”

as he drew his knife toward the piece of white cedar. But once his blade touched wood, all trembling ceased (Yocom 2000). Why, I wondered, did all trembling cease? What might the touch of wood mean to William—Guillaume Jean Richard—who had lived all his life in the timberwoods of Acadian New Brunswick and Maine?

There’s a loneliness to this fieldwork, a necessary loneliness, I think. I do live alone for most of the summer in Maine—in 1993, my husband John and I bought a small “camp,” a cabin in the area. I come as soon as I can in early June and open the camp that’s been closed since September. John follows in August.

Each spring when I walk through the cabin for the first time, a cool, damp loneliness washes over me, as if the house were

a living thing, sorrowful as Persephone for its months without breeze or birdsong. Why this loneliness, I ask myself. The aloneness of being a fieldworker is right and fitting, I know; it’s a feeling that comes from acknowledging over and over again that I will never be native to this area. I will spend most of my professional life working in it, dedicated to it, but I will never be of it, never from it. It is, though, a place where I, as both a poet and a folklorist, keep watch.

Nevertheless, loneliness is the greeter at my door, and “Opening Camp” speaks to that loneliness, to thoughts of distant friends, and to the grace, grief, and sensual delights that life constantly places before us.

While questions are vital to my poetry

## TENDING WHITE CEDAR

by Margaret Yocom

for William —Guillaume Jean Richard, 1900–1993— woodsman, woodcarver

His metal knife drifts toward the wood.  
At ninety-some, he shakes and slows,  
His nails are dense as oxen horn,  
The blade slips high then falls below  
While he attends white cedar’s heart.

His blade cuts into wood at last  
And all his early trembling halts:  
He hears that ring— ax after ax  
At Nappanogan, Dead Man’s Camp,  
On worn paths to white cedar’s heart.

There deep snow lies on fir and spruce  
There black bear sleep, and moose and buck  
There brothers work with cousins, sons  
There woodpiles stand, neat, by the stump.  
There woodsmen know their knives’ true touch

But here, when the Cruiser makes his mark  
Who then will tend white cedar’s heart?

[Note: In the logging woods, timber cruisers mark trees for woodsmen to cut down]

## FIRST WASH

by Margaret Yocom

Wires hum with snow melt.  
Crows and a west breeze  
call from spruce and fir.  
One patch of soil pulls  
down sudden March sun  
to the near garden.

Our house has become  
small, his words too wide.

Outside—apricot,  
turquoise, lavender,  
lemon. Steam rises  
from towels. With clothespins  
I craft northern lights.

No one asks a thing

If I open my coat  
I am the shape of wind.

[“First Wash” was originally published in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, 58(4) (Summer 2008), p. 16. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.]

## OPENING CAMP

By Margaret Yocom

Even the moon is hidden by the mountain  
tonight. Lilacs are still ten dreams away.

The key in my hand fits this silted lock.  
Whose knife and spoon? Whose pen?  
Whose empty plate?

*You are here. You will always be here.*

Repeat these lines thirty times. Every day.

January, February, March. I breathe ice.  
In the museum of cold, one glove is on  
display.

I gave away my field guide to the hours.  
Tell me, does the cedar grow by the lake?

Everything I thought I wanted lies frozen  
in this alabaster air. Come soon. Stay.

[“Opening Camp” was originally published in Caro, Frank de. 2008. *The Folklore Muse: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Reflections by Folklorists*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, p. 68. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.]

practice, absolute answers are not. Poetry allows me to explore questions, to dramatize one or more possibilities, and then to see how well these possibilities sit in this corner of the world. I can show, for example, a woman so desirous of space for herself that she hangs a wash on a biting cold day, a woman gathering together her daily tasks and the world around her to create art. As I follow my questions, I write toward open-ended conclusions, ones that are, as Stephen Dunn describes, “evocative of the mysteries that the poem has enacted” (Dunn 2001, 169).

The practices of poetry and ethnography share, above all, one vital motion: the loving, scrupulous attention to detail. For poet Stephen Dunn, detail is a moral exercise: “All poems are moral to the extent that they are evidence in content and form of an attentiveness to the details and circumstances of our lives. They get right the things they pay attention to, which always implies a correction of some sort. The issue is not right versus wrong. It’s right versus off (the imprecise, the superficial, etc.)” (Dunn 2001, 41).

Jane Hirshfield writes of a necessary concentration, a “particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open.... The experience of concentration,” she explains, “may be...a simple, unexpected sense of deep accord between yourself and everything. It may come as the harvest of long looking.” Great art, she notes, is “thought that has been... concentrated in just this way: honed and shaped by a silky attention brought to bear on the recalcitrant matter of earth and of life” (Hirschfield 1997, 5). It is the task of the writer, then, to become “in the words of Henry James, a person on whom nothing is lost. What is put into the care of such a person will be well tended. Such a person can be trusted to tell the stories she is given to tell, and to tell them with the compassion that comes when the self’s deepest interest is not in the self, but in turning outward and into awareness” (223).

Still, I worry, sometimes, about this new ethnographic lens of mine, this poetry. Should I be using my imagination to explore

these questions, to reach toward what seems unsayable, unnameable? Some answers come from the people in Rangeley. Rodney Richard, reading a draft of my poem about his father, William, exclaimed with pleasure, “Well, I’ll be damned!” and pocketed a copy. The Rangeley Public Library honored me along with other writers of folklore and poetry at their 2006 Literary Gala and at a reading of our poetry.

Jane Kenyon, who made her home in rural New Hampshire, says that naming is part of the work: “The poet’s job is to... put into words those feelings we all have that are so deep, so important, and yet so difficult to name. The poet’s job is to find a name for everything; to be a fearless finder of the names of things; to be an advocate for the beauty of language, the subtleties of language” (Kenyon 1999, 183).

And I believe her. With other poets and ethnographers, I’ll do my best to keep watch, write it down, and get it right. ▼

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