# CHAPTER 40
# "THE LAST PIECE/S'LETSCHT SCHTICK" AND "EATING ALONE"

*Margaret R. Yocom*

## The Last Piece/S'Letscht Schtick

*For Elmer Christman Keck, 1893–1982*

Through the crescent hole, down
between stove pipe and floor, down
he and his cousins peer
into the hushed dining room, its closed windows.
His stove-pipe-peering would be too hot, except
it's summer, early, the full heat
not come onto his father's fields,
no need yet to thin the shoots of corn, walk
row after row, pinch
what is not wanted.

I have never wanted raisin pie,
but he does. Badly.
His nose follows the journey round
the funeral table,
one adult hand to another adult hand,
its hovering above the tatted white tablecloth.

One adult hand after another adult hand
lifts the silver server,
slices through buttery dough
into that dark center,
deep and dense,
scents of cinnamon, brown sugar,
hand over hand,
passing it on.

Margaret R. Yocom, 'Eating Alone' was originally published in Frank de Caro (ed.) *The Folklore Muse: Poetry, Fiction and Other Reflections by Folklorists* (Boulder: Utah State University Press, 2008), p. 212. Reproduced with permission of Utah State University Press in the format 'Republish in a book' via Copyright Clearance Center. 'The Last Piece/S'Letscht Schtick' and the accompanying commentary have not previously been published and have been commissioned for this publication.

If the mourners looked up,
they would have seen that ring of eyes,
that warm halo of desire.
Had he spoken to them, below,
no pie, ever, for days.
No dinner.

Had he spoken, I would
not have understood
his German sweetened, smoothed by
two hundred years of Pennsylvania Freindschaft,
of Karrich un Kich,
Kinner un Kieh.
His ears trail the words.
His eyes, the pie.
I have never wanted raisin pie.
I want those words.

He watches the slices disappear,
whispers the alarm:
Vier!
Drei!
Zwee!
Eens!
Fork in hand, his
uncle reaches once more for the pie.

From his faraway perch, he
calls to them, and me,
telling my tape-recorder his first memory,
that last piece,
his words blurted out in a language
lost to me,
ripped by war, and war again,
by "victory cabbage"
    Can you say it? zzzz- Sawwergraut
by "hot dog"
    Can you say it? frrrr- Frankfurter

He cries, my grandfather, as do I,
"Datt geht s'letscht Schtick!"

Notes:

—My thanks to Dr. Irmgard Wagner, George Mason University, emerita, for checking my German, and to Dr. Mark Louden, University of Wisconsin, for translating my German into Pennsylvania German.

—Translation.

Pennsylvania German (German, English):

Freindschaft (Freundschaft, relatives)
Karrich un Kich (Kirche und Küche, church and kitchen)
Kinner un Kieh (Kinder und Kühe, children and cows)
Vier! Drei! Zwee! Eens! (Vier, Drei, Zwei, Eins; four, three, two, one)
Sawwergraut (Sauerkraut, sauerkraut)
"Datt geht s'letscht Schtick!" ("Dort geht das letzte Stück!" "There goes the last piece!")

## Eating Alone

I am from fields of manure and wheat,
from cow corn high enough to hide in, from
creek beds of violets, daffodils

I am from stone springhouses, from
bottles of milk and cream
shuttered, cool in August noons

I am from smokehouses, from
hooks and hatchets, from
blood and feathers

I am from farms with two houses,
one for grandfather, grandmother
when deep-veined hands turn from tractors, from

cauldrons of corn meal mush
I am from winding staircases, from attics, from
gauzy curtains in summer's night breezes

I am from jar after glass jar of tomatoes, green
beans, peaches, applesauce, but
I am also from chow-chow, dried corn, scrapple

shoo-fly pie, schmierkäse, sauerkraut, souse, and
all those other foods you
won't eat with me

*Thanks to George Ella Lyon and her poem "Where I'm From."*

## Artist's statement to accompany poems "The Last Piece/S'Letscht Schtick" And "Eating Alone"

Poetry and Folklore: Partners in Practice

I had been writing poems for a few years when my parents put in my thirteen-year-old hands a wondrous gift: a scarlet red hardcover book protected by a gauzy white jacket that announced: *The Life Treasury of*

*American Folklore*. Page by page, I read stories of Joe Magarac, Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and, my favorite, the ghostly tale of the "Girl in the Lavender Dress."[1] Since then, folklore and poetry have been companion practices for me.

Throughout my university years, I took courses in folklore and in poetry. I learned that the first American university folklorist, Francis James Child of Harvard, came to his devotion for traditional ballads through his scholarship in poetry. When I began my fieldwork projects in Pennsylvania and then in Maine in the 1970s, poems by Adrienne Rich and many others sang me to sleep. As I collected folklore, I met people who composed poems orally and recited them to hometown friends (Yocom and Wilcox, 2000).

This melding of poetry and folklore goes beyond my personal circumstances, though, because writing poems and writing ethnographic folklore studies converge in so many ways. One practice vital to both is the loving, scrupulous attention to detail. For poet Stephen Dunn, attention has a moral force: "All poems are moral to the extent that they are evidence . . . 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.)" (41).

Jane Hirshfield writes of a necessary concentration in poetry that pertains to folklore, too, a "particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open. . . . It may come as the harvest of long looking." Great art, she notes, is "thought that has been . . . honed and shaped by a silky attention brought to bear on the recalcitrant matter of earth and of life" (5). The writer must, in the words of Henry James, become "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 . . ." (223).

When folklorists enter the "field," we take tools with us, according to our talents, to help us attend: pen and ink to sketch, blank journals, computers, audio and visual recording equipment, and digital cameras. We record what we see, hear, smell, and taste; and we return to our recordings and photographs to see what we did not see at first, to hear what we did not hear. We want to "get it right" or come as close to "right" as mortals can. We want to be observers on whom "nothing is lost." Ethnographic practice is a moral practice: the great responsibility of preserving and sharing others' lives and talents is in our hands and hearts, and we take our charge and our code of ethics seriously. And, since so many of us work with our own family, community, ethnic, and work groups, our responsibilities often feel double- and triple-weighted.

A second practice common to both folklore and poetry attends to the translation of oral performance into the written word through ethnopoetics. This practice of breaking prose into short, poetry-like lines began in the United States among poets such as Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder with training in anthropology, folklore, or linguistics, as well as anthropologists, folklorists, and linguists who wrote poetry: Nathaniel Tarn, Stanley Diamond, Dennis Tedlock (Tedlock, 1992). Working with orally-collected speech, we who use ethnopoetics break our story's lines where a speaker pauses; we signal tone, loudness, speed and more with typographic symbols such as dashes, spaces, bold typeface, and more.

To do this work, we listen deeply: we hear the voice rise at the end of a fragmented line, the telling pause, and the sudden, long silence. We mark the shifting climates of the story in hopes of keeping alive these words that live on the breath. One Master of Fine Arts: Poetry student in my graduate seminar "Living Words: Folklore and Creative Writing" described ethnopoetics as "life-changing" because it helped him attend to "how people actually speak." Another observed that ethnopoetics reinforced her "process of figuring placement, break, breath, punctuation, emphasis—exactly the kind of motion [she goes] through when [she works] on [her] own [poetry]" (Yocom, 2009).

Because poetry and folklore form such a creative partnership, I combine them regularly. I use my poetry writing to learn more—and in a different way—about those traditions that matter most to me. Writing poetry offers me a way of freedom and imagination, of permission and wide-open doors. "[O]ur house is

open, there are no keys in the doors,/and invisible guests come in and out at will" writes Czeslaw Milosz in "Ars Poetica?" And from Emily Dickinson: "I dwell in Possibility – /A fairer House than Prose – /More numerous of Windows – /Superior – for Doors –"

I use poetry writing, for example, to explore issues I wonder about as I do fieldwork, questions that I will never be able to answer using the data-rich methods that a folklore researcher must. What is she thinking? Why does she do that? As a poet, though, I can create a world where a person answers a question that, in the real world of our fieldworker-informant relationship, she cannot. So, in flights of fancy, I can picture what is just out of sight, and beyond understanding.[2]

With my poetry, I can also approach a folklore text from a different direction. For example, as a scholar of folktales, I wrote a scholarly essay, based on textual proof, about the Grimm Brothers' "Allerleirauh" ("All Kinds of Fur"), a little-known version of "Cinderella" that includes an incestuous father from whom Allerleirauh escapes, in disguise as a dirty, rough-pelt-covered being. She works in a castle kitchen, and, helped by the cook, effects her transformation into a queen (Yocom, 2012).

I have also been interested, though, in what Allerleirauh would say, in her own words, if she told her own story. As a scholar, I cannot prove what Allerleirauh thinks; but, as a poet, I can write her words and worlds into being. Using the contemporary poetic practice of "erasure,"[3] I am writing a book-length poem, all KINdS of FUR. I "erase" some of the Grimms' words and letters; the words that remain are Allerleirauh's as she tells her own tale of incest, escape, survival, and re-creation.

I also use my poetry to find out more about my own traditions and my reactions to them, as I have with the poems published in this Reader. As I write, inviting the unknown and opening to what comes, I rarely know where a poem will take me. I did not expect these poems about my Pennsylvania German heritage—and foodways—to swerve as they did.

"Write a poem about your first memory" read one of the prompts my colleague and poetry workshop professor Eric Pankey handed out at the beginning of a class. Immediately, the story my grandfather Elmer Keck told me about his earliest memory came to mind, and I wrote down a few, quick notes. Later, as I wrote more, I found myself thinking about my grandfather's first languages: Pennsylvania German at home, German in church. Then a great wave of loss swept over me as I felt, once again, how incomplete I feel being Pennsylvania German but living without the language. My thoughts turned to World War I, how my grandfather would never speak of what it was like to grow up German American, then, in our hometown, even when I would ask why he and his father carefully named their slaughterhouse "The Abbatoir," not "Das Schlachthaus." How much ethnic culture and language, I considered, is lost during war times?[4]

In later drafts of the poem, my grandfather's desire for that disappearing piece of raisin pie linked itself with my desire for Pennsylvania German and for those last pieces of the language now gone, pinched off, from our family. The poem's turn also allowed me to show how an orally told personal story can shift in meaning for each person who hears it: in my life, my grandfather Elmer's tale of a lost, last piece of pie morphed into something quite different.

My poem "Eating Alone" took its unexpected turn as it neared its end. As I listed the things I loved about my grandparents' Yocom family farm, I found myself listing additional things that I loved but that others found quite strange, even suspect, those cultural objects—especially in the intimate circle of the meal-time table—that set me quite apart. What traditions influence me, and where am I from, I wondered as I wrote, living as I did in Virginia and do now in Maine, and feeling the pull of my Pennsylvania hometown.[5]

All told, with my poetry I call myself to another way of writing, one that approaches prose with the sensibility of a poet: listening for sound, feeling for rhythm, and sitting still so images and story-lines can rise. I want to write ethnography to the heartbeat of poetry. Poetry and folklore, folklore and poetry—my true guides. I step into the days ahead, hands reaching out to both.

## Notes

1. Later, I would learn the complicated histories behind these so-called "folk heroes." As Edward Ives writes in his 1963 *Midwest Folklore* review of this book: "All told, there is absolutely nothing in this book of any importance to a folklorist. . . . If it gets people to say they 'just love folklore,' it will also give a lot of folklorists a busy time helping these same people sort out the real article from the bogus" (250).
2. For a discussion of this practice of mine and my poem "First Wash," see Yocom, 2012.
3. To see examples of erasure poetry, see http://erasures.wavepoetry.com
4. Cultural loss in the context of war through foodways. Myung Mi Kim, for example, in "Siege Document" writes of her family's experience in Korea during and after the war: "We are allowed to keep one bag of potatoes or carrots after working a ten-hour day / pulling these vegetables and loading them onto trucks / . . . Bitter, bitter roots" (91, 93). Brian Turner, veteran of the second Iraq War, documents the loss of local foods in "Jameel": "They say to produce one pound of honey / bees must travel from flower to hive / at least twelve thousand times" (57).
5. I am attracted to Lucy Lippard's discussions [1997] of our "multicentered" lives in contemporary society, and our several "homes."

## Bibliography

Dickinson, Emily. "I dwell in Possibility" (466). http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182904 Accessed 19 June 2013.
Dunn, Stephen. 2001. *Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions.
Hirshfield, Jane. 1997. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry.* New York: HarperCollins.
The Editors of Life Magazine 1961. *The Life Treasury of American Folklore*. New York: Time, Inc. Illustrated by James Lewicki.
Kim, Myung Mi. 2002. Commons. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Ives, Edward D. Ives. 1963–64. Review of *The Life Treasury of American Folklore*. *Midwest Folklore* (13:4 Winter) 249–251). http://www.jstor.org/stable/4318052 Accessed 22 June 2013.
Lippard, Lucy. 1997. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press.
Milosz, Czeslaw. 2003. *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001*. New York: Ecco.
Tedlock, Dennis. 1992. "Ethnopoetics." In *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-centered Handbook*, edited by Richard Bauman. New York: Oxford University Press.
Turner, Brian. 2005. *Here, Bullet*. Farmington, ME: Alice James Press.
Yocom, Margaret R. 2009. "Writing Down the Breath." Forum Presentation. Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference, Chicago, 11–14 February.
Yocom, Margaret R. 2012. "But who are you really?" Ambiguous Bodies and Ambiguous Pronouns in "Allerleirauh" (ATU 510B). In *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Kay Turner, pp. 89–118. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Yocom, Margaret R. 2012. "Keeping Watch." *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* (38:1–2 Spring-Summer) 20–24.
Yocom, Margaret R. and Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox. 2000. "'Just Call Me Sandy, Son': Poet Jeep Wilcox's Tribute to Sandy Ives." *Northeast Folklore: Essays in Honor of Edward D. Ives*. Ed. Pauleena MacDougall and David Taylor, pp. 405–409. Orono: University of Maine Press and the Maine Folklife Center.

**Bloomsbury Academic**
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

**www.bloomsbury.com**



First published 2015



**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-0-8578-5723-1
PB: 978-0-8578-5699-9

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in India

# THE FOOD AND FOLKLORE READER

Edited by Lucy M. Long

BLOOMSBURY