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Harvesting Memories

* A native of Southwest Georgia, North Carolina's new poet laureate first found her voice amid the fields of the family farm.

By Barbara Rivera Holmes

ALBANY — Poet Kathryn Stripling Byer first loved songs, with their words, rhyme and images.

"I always wished I could be a singer," said Byer during a recent phone interview from home in Cullowhee, N.C.

Alas, she did not become a singer. Yet, she arranges words into her music — poetry.

"The whole texture of language became something I wanted to work with," she said, "like draping this gorgeous shawl of language around me."

Byer, a native of Camilla, has enveloped others with her own "shawl of language," so much so that the writer has been named poet laureate for North Carolina. A June 15 ceremony cemented the title.

Byer is the daughter of C.M. and Bernice Stripling of Camilla.

"The main duty is to just be a good representative of poetry in the state," she said. "To be an ambassador out there, be visible and make a case for people (to read) poetry."

In a column for The Camilla Enterprise, Byer's younger brother, Charles Stripling of Albany State University, said he felt his sister bore the responsibility to carry on the family tradition of strong, talented, intelligent women. His "favorite all-time poem," he wrote in the newspaper piece, is one written by his sister — "I Inherit the Light of My Grandmother's House."

"My great-grandmother and grandmother had been visual artists," Byer said, "and both my parents loved to read.

"I was an early reader. Words came easy to me, and I loved working with them."

Though deft with the English language, Byer did not immediately fall into poetry, though she gave it a chance early on.

Her high school poetry was bad, she said. "Hallmark greeting card-type things."

Byer toiled around with other writing formats before she finally gave in to the rhythm of poetry.

"When I was at Wesleyan College in Macon, I was really interested in being a fiction writer," she said of the influence great Southern women writers had on her. "So, I started writing fiction, but as I wrote more, I just really became seduced by poetry."

Byer has since published four books of poetry: "The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest," 1986; "Black Shawl," 1998; "Catching Light" and "Wildwood Flower," 2002, and "Wake," 2003.

"Wildwood Flower" received the James Laughlin Award (formerly the Lamont Poetry Selection), which recognizes and supports a poet's second book, from the Academy of American Poets.

Her sixth book, "Coming to Rest," is scheduled for release in 2006. Byer said it returns to family, themes and imagery of Southwest Georgia.

Many writers cite their personal lives as a source of creativity. As a fiction writer, Byer wasn't able to tap into that part of her.

"I discovered in the act of writing poetry, that for some reason, poetry enabled me to get at the memories," she said. "To really be able to enter the memories of growing up in south Georgia — the colors, the fields, the way people spoke."

She nurtured her newfound passion all through school, and "by the time I was ready to graduate from Wesleyan, I was writing both fiction and poetry, and the poem that showed me what I could do was a simple poem about standing by the gate on my favorite field at my parents' farm.

"It's mostly descriptive, but (it was) just finally being able to take a place and find a language for it, a place for it," Byer said.

She was accepted into the graduate writing program at University of North Carolina — Greensboro, where she became serious about poetry.

"I realized it was going to be a long journey," she said, "that I had a lot to learn. It would really be a life's calling."

She met her husband, James Byer, when she took a faculty position at Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee. She left WCU in 1998. Her husband retired this year as head of the English department at the university. Their daughter, Corinna Byer, also is a writer.

Byer has an ability to make a home on paper for a place that, though geographically fixed, exists mostly in her mind. As the face of North Carolina poetry, Byer will promote

the diversity of the state — its music, culture, heritage, landscape, people — through the imagery of her words.

But it takes time to develop the personal relationship that such writing requires.

"It took me a while to listen to enough people talking to become acquainted with the arts and crafts here, the mountain music," she said, "until I felt moved to start writing about it."

Byer's paternal grandmother was raised in North Carolina, and the writer feels "a dual loyalty both to the coastal plain of Southwest Georgia and the mountains of North Carolina."

Though she considers herself "an optimistic poet," not the type to wallow in melancholy or befriend the romantic, suicidal stereotype of poetry, she admits that "there are certain poems that we have to write that go into deep places. And it really is like going underwater. ... It's not always a happy-go-lucky type of thing."

Byer believes in the power of words to inform and heal, but also to destroy.

"I believe that language can speak to us," she said.

"When we let our language become infused with cynicism (and) double-speak ... then we are in trouble.

"And I think our writers should be there as watchdogs, to say, 'Here's how language can be used beautifully,' so that we aren't diminished by it."

Byer has made language beautiful for many loyal readers. Now, as poet laureate, she's sure to captivate many more.