

Singing the Mountains: A Conversation
Between Lee Smith and Kathryn Stripling Byer
(Recorded at the Kathryn Stripling Byer Festival,
Emory & Henry College, October 19, 2001)

LS: It is a great pleasure for me to be here to join everybody else in honoring Kay, whose work has meant so much to me over the years. Every time I read her poetry, every time I hear her read her own poetry, as we all had the pleasure of doing last night, it activates something in my brain, in my heart, that makes me really want to write. I don't know what it is, but I think she has this effect on many other writers, too. I think I'm just one of many who are inspired in particular by her language and the rhythm of her poetry, which I think is unique. The whole time I was working on *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the novel I've written that has meant the most to me, I was reading a manuscript that Kay had sent me of her Alma poems. Somehow the more I read it, read her work and read those poems, the more I became able to sink deeper and deeper into the voice of that novel. So those poems meant everything to me. And when I was almost through with the novel, I remember Kay sent me a copy of her poem "Weep-Willow," and I read the poem and thought, "Oh, my God, it's taken me four hundred pages to write this novel, and everything the whole novel's about is in this poem. She did it in one page." It just didn't seem fair! But that's what poetry is: a wonderful kind of condensation, a concentration, of prose thought, of narrative thought. Anyway, just because I'm here and I'm running this interview, I'm going to get Kay to read for us one more time and then we'll talk about "Weep-Willow" in the context of her work and of her life. I love it.

KSB: Lee has heard this poem so many times that you'd think she would have gotten tired of it by now.

Weep-Willow

At night she watched the road
and sang. I'd sign and settle on the floor
beside her. One song led
to one more song. Some unquiet grave.
A bed of stone. The ship that spun round
three times 'ere it sank,
near ninety verses full of grief.
She sang sad all night long

and smiled, as if she dared me
shed a tear. Sweet Lizzie Creek swung low
along the rocks, and dried beans rattled
in the wind. Sometimes her black dog howled
at fox or bear, but she'd not stop,
no, not for God Himself, not even if He came
astride a fine white horse and bore the Crown
of Glory in His hands. The dark was all
she had. And sometimes moonlight
on the ceaseless water. "Fill my cup,"

she'd say, and sip May moonshine
till her voice came back as strong as bullfrogs
in the sally grass. You whippoorwills
keep silent, and you lonesome owls go haunt
another woman's darkest hours. Clear,

clear back I hear her singing me to sleep.
"Come down," she trolls,
"Come down among the willow
shade and weep, you fair
and tender ladies left to lie alone,
the sheets so cold,
the nights so long."

LS: Thank you. It just seemed so amazing to me that the name of my novel was *Fair and Tender Ladies* and that Kay was writing about the same situations. One of the main ideas in that novel was its focus on a woman who was a writer, writing in this case letters to her sisters and to other women who mean a lot to her. The writing itself is a way to make it through the night, a way to lead an examined life, a way to make sense of her life, to find meaning and to order events. And of course that's what Kay's poem is about, though the metaphor there is about singing, singing the ballads--which again are narratives, are stories--singing to make it through the night. That is the purpose of art of any kind; it's an ordering of experience, a way to make it through our lives and to understand them. A wonderful quote from Peter Taylor is, "I never knew what I thought until I read what I'd written." That's one of the main reasons to create poetry, or to create narratives, or to try to create any kind of art--poetry being the ultimate distillation of that impulse.

In *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*, Kay has written what might be called her credo, explaining why she writes, how she came to write, what she does as a writer. We'll start with that and then look briefly, book by book, at how she has told her own story within what I see as a sort of metaphorical memoir, making sense of her life as she lived it. We have the great good fortune that she started writing as a young woman. Here are the first three paragraphs of Kay's essay "Deep Water":

"Solitude," said Emma Bell Miles in *The Spirit of the Mountains*, "is deep water, and small boats do not ride well in it." No one who has lived for long in these mountains can doubt the power of that solitude. It can cause a woman to sink into its depths and never rise again. It can drive her crazy trying to break its hold on her, all the while drawing her closer and closer to the edge of some jump-off, the distance rising up before her like a vision of freedom.

The worst thing that icy blue water can do to a woman is to render her silent. Resigned to its hold, she becomes mute when she ought to be singing. A singer knows how to navigate deep water, setting the ripples spreading, sailing the song on its way. A singing woman knows how to travel, how to hang on for dear life and ride on the wave of her own voice.

To the women living in these mountains years ago, singing must have seemed the only way they could travel. Though their men might hightail it to Texas or spend weeks away on hunting forays, though the circuit rider might

come and go, waving his Bible and shouting his message, they remained. They knew their place. They knew its jump-offs, its laurel hells, its little graves grown over with honeysuckle and blackberry briars. They knew the lay of cloud shadows rolling down one ridge and up another. And their place knew them. Out of that reciprocal knowing, they were able to sing their way through their solitude and into a larger web of voices, voices that I have come to see as connective tissue stretching across these hills. Or, to draw on an image that has haunted me for a long time, like a black shawl that gathers up all of these voices into its complicated, endlessly evolving pattern. (63)

Of course, this black shawl is a connective device to bring women together in their songs.

Let's go back then to your first book, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*. It seems to me that in this book we find the voice of a young woman who is very much at one with her surroundings, very much a part of the farm culture in which she has been raised, very much a part of the family and everything else that is transpiring. Jim Applewhite, who wrote the preface to the book, mentions that this poetic voice is "warm and intensely human, . . . present[ing] a person who has mastered those roles society in the past marked out as woman's, as she moves on from *wife, mother, queen of the harvest* into a less explored terrain of identity and expression." I'd like to start with a few of these early images, which I just love. Let me ask you to read "Daughter."

KSB: This is turning into a poetry reading, which is fine with me. I really do think that the best things I have to say are in the poems. Lee will be asking me some questions, and I'll muddle on through them as best I can, but try to remember that the poems say it all better. (Reads "Daughter")

LS: That's an incredibly enviable position, I think, to be fully a part of the place where you are and fully a part of the people who have formed you and formed your consciousness and yet to have the perspective to know it. Here you are, seventeen, and you're able to stand straight and say, "Here I am. The future is a field for me; it's open, it's ready." That's the most wonderful image to me, your knowing that you're the girl in the midst of the harvest. And then to be able to go on to say, "I am the harvest," is even more powerful, this seeing yourself as the product of this environment, the product of this family, the product of all this love. Another of my favorite poems from this first collection that also expresses the same sentiment, a poem that is equally jubilant, is entitled "Cornwalking." It involves a memory of being in the middle of the corn fields on your grandfather's farm and stomping down the corn rows. In it you describe yourself as follows:

. . . stalking straight out of this world
down the streets of the corn kingdom,
sassy and satisfied,
twining its green worms around my heart's finger
for luck in love, kicking up dirt
for the smell of it. Cornblossom Maiden

I was, with the corn itch
and squirt of the kernel in both eyes
from testing a ripe ear. So what did I care

if a thundercloud crept from the forest
and waited for me to come out
again? Neither my cousins
nor my grandmother ringing the bell in the backyard
for me to come home on the double
could find me once
I reached the middle of three thousand corn rows
to sing at the top of my lungs
with the gathering wind in the corn itself
singing, "We are growing everywhere.
What is the world but our song?"

This is the song of the girl in the midst of the harvest. With all this wonderful imagery of childhood and adolescence, I wanted to ask you about your actual childhood growing up on a farm in South Georgia. That's a very different place from the mountains, and it's with the mountains that we associate most of your poetry. Was this childhood really so idyllic, and was your father actually a farmer, and did you have brothers and sisters?

KSB: Poetic license. I did grow up on a farm, and my grandfather had a farm too, about four miles down the road, on a dirt road that was often hard to navigate because it was quite sandy. I had one brother and a lot of cousins. In fact, one of my cousins was asked once if he had a lot of friends and he replied, "No, I just have cousins." That was sort of the way I felt too. I loved the farm, both our farm and my grandparents' farm. I loved the smells of them; I loved the sounds of them. Of course, we were living in a county that was 55% African American. We had a multi-racial society there, and that fact added a great deal to the tensions, the richness, the stories, just the whole texture of life there. When I came to Western North Carolina, I was drawn to the singing of mountain people because they could openly sing. The black men and women who worked for us would sing too, but it was in the margins. It was background noise, and white people weren't really supposed to be listening to it. I'm sure there was wonderful music in the black churches where I grew up that I never heard; it was going on at the same time that I was sitting in our Presbyterian church churning out the same hymns, though I still love some of those old hymns. I missed out on all of that. By the time I left for college, my rural background, that whole society, was beginning to change. People didn't grow gardens any more. My grandmother had become old and ill; my grandfather was nearing the end of his life. A way of life was nearing its end. The small farms were beginning to be gobbled up by larger ones. There were supermarkets moving in so that the family grocery store soon became a thing of the past. Jim Applewhite has a title for one of his poems that has haunted me for years: "Driving through a Country That Is Vanishing." I look back and realize that, indeed, I was moving through a landscape that was vanishing. In many ways it was idyllic. I had my favorite tree that I would sit under. I called it my "mother tree" because it had these boles that looked like big bosoms. It was my mother tree, and I would look out over my favorite field at various times of the day, loving the way the light moved over the corn or oats or whatever my father might have planted there. My father was a complicated man. He was a farmer, and farmers can be very difficult, stubborn. Nothing ever quite goes right enough for them. There was always a drought going on--or too much rain. The peanuts would be plowed and out in the field, and suddenly the rains would start and it would rain every day. So, no wonder my father seemed a morose man

most of the time. But he was also a brilliant and wonderful man in so many ways, with an excellent mind. He was able to build up his farm and stay ahead of the game, planning for the future in ways that some other farmers could not and thus went out of business.

I left all of that when I went to college and knew, as I think I'd always known as soon as I reached a certain age, that I wanted to go to the mountains because the mountains had been presented to me when I was a child as a place where the air was cleaner and sweeter, the people were nicer, the water was safer to drink. It was like a magic land. It was where my grandmother, my father's mother, had grown up.

LS: Talk about your grandmother, your beautiful grandmother.

KSB: My beautiful grandmother had been a striking woman in her younger days. She was nearly six feet tall. At the age of sixteen she had acquired enough education to become a teacher. She taught Latin and handwriting. Back then, you know, handwriting was very important; students had to learn the Palmer method, and she taught that. She was just a well-educated woman. She could have been an artist, I suppose, because her mother had been a painter who was brought over from Germany at a very young age. We have her oil paintings hanging all over my parents' house. So my grandmother had culture and ambition in her background. But she ended up in a small town, teaching Latin and handwriting, and she got married and became trapped there. When her first husband died, leaving her with a young son, she married a man who ran a furniture store and became a crackerjack businesswoman. My mother said that she could cuss like a man and that she was a woman of strong opinions, a tendency that made having her as a mother-in-law not a lot of fun. She suffered from several illnesses--was perhaps a hypochondriac--and the doctor prescribed morphine. Think about it. She was a bright, well-educated woman with a lot of time on her hands. "A woman must work / else she thinks too much," as "Wildwood Flower" says. This was a woman who thought too much, who had a lot of nervous energy. In her later years she dyed her hair bright red, henna red; she kept it dyed. But what happened was that she became addicted to morphine. And the doctor wrote prescriptions for it. It wasn't like she had to sneak around to get it. Gradually, as a result of the addiction, she starved to death. My father finally got the courage to go and lift her bodily out of her bed, defying her second husband, carrying her to the hospital. And he promised her that if she got well, if she would fight back and begin to eat and save herself, he would take her back to the mountains, to Dahlenega, where she had been born. But she died that night.

So that experience was always in my childhood, reinforced by my father's sense of guilt and loss because he was an only child and was unusually close to his mother. After she died, we would go fairly frequently up to the mountains to visit our relatives there, and it was always a magical time. We would leave before dawn; it would be dark, and my mother would have bought comic books and magazines for me and my brother. We would wake up at 3:00 a.m. and pile into the car and have our little pallets to sleep on. At the first sight of a mountain my mother would say, "There's a mountain, there's a mountain," and we would all be so excited. It was like the Promised Land to us. So I knew that I wanted to live in the mountains after I got my education. I wanted to live where my grandmother had wanted to live.

LS: I want to interrupt here for just a second because I love the story of your grandmother and the story of somebody who dreamed the mountains before she ever went there. I just want to

read the first stanza of the poem “My Beautiful Grandmother” and then the end of the next poem:

My Beautiful Grandmother

died ugly,
wasted with hunger,
her arms black and blue from the needles,
the last ones she took up
when she stopped embroidering pink cornucopias
on square after square of white cotton.
Nobody could coax her to eat after six years
of morphine. Not even my father.

And that poem is followed in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* by “Ghost Story,” which imagines that the beautiful grandmother got back to the mountains, something that only her granddaughter did in actuality:

. . . Thirty years
she cursed the heat
of south Georgia, the flies,
and the infernal gossip
that branded her. Unsmiling
she walked the small streets.
Now she stalks these mountains
from Big Fork to Snowbird,
her shoe buttons gleaming,
her silk skirt a cloud
trailing after the full moon.

Isn't that wonderful? I think that's the most wonderful vision of her, of her ghost, since she never did return to the mountains.

I have just one more question about this period before the time when you went off to college. I'm curious to know whether there was anybody in your childhood to whom you would attribute your love of language. The metaphor of singing represents art and poetry in this first book of poems. The girl is stalking down the cornrows singing, and singing the ballads is also a metaphor for poetry, for art. Was there anybody from whom you got this extraordinary sense of language? Did anybody read to you? Were there any poets, any teachers? Was there anything beyond the poetic notion of longing and beauty and mystery associated with the mountains and with the beautiful grandmother who was, in her own way, a kind of artist? What about language? Where did that interest come from?

KSB: There were books everywhere in my house. My father was a great reader, and my mother too, though she tended to fancy the romance genre. My father loved history. We have stacks and stacks and stacks of Civil War books. My father is still a huge Civil War buff. He has read a lot during his life, so we grew up seeing our parents read. My mother would read to me, of course. My father was president of the Farm Bureau for a number of years, and he decided that what that group needed was a newsletter. So he began publishing one, and for each issue he would write an editorial. He loved that work. He would pull in quotations from Latin

poets and other sources, going through all sorts of books to find appropriate material, and would then write his editorials based on whatever he'd been reading. Though he certainly didn't fancy himself a writer, I could see that he was quite caught up with language himself. There was also some storytelling going on, too, stories I heard from my grandparents, but books were the main thing. I drove my mother crazy--she found it difficult to get me to do any work because I was always reading. She thought I read too much, and she wanted me to stop it and go out and do what normal girls did. And then I had a couple of really good teachers who had us writing lots of essays. Even in high school I came to love seeing what would happen on a piece of paper. I guess those are the places where the language came from.

LS: I think it's interesting that my mother always used to say what your mother said. She'd tell me, "Quit reading! It'll do you no good whatsoever." And yet I don't think I've ever read another poet whose work is as much a part of the actual world as your poetry is. Everything in it is so concrete, so real.

Talk about your college years. What were your influences there, and in what particular ways? Did you want to write? Did you know that you were going to be a poet when you went away to college?

KSB: I wanted to be an artist of some sort. I didn't want to just be ordinary. I wanted to be someone who would travel and do strange things. Not too strange; just strange enough. I went to a girls' school in Macon, Georgia--Wesleyan College. At that time it was very strict, and the emphasis was on being a good Southern lady. At last I had something that I could really rebel against. I met a couple of rebellious girls who became my friends, and it was a huge liberation for me to realize that I could really let loose if I wanted to. I loved listening to them; they were so mean, and that was really fun. I had a couple of excellent writing courses. One was called Sophomore Writing Lab, and what we did was to follow the syllabus of the sophomore literature course. Our writing assignments, our writing springboards, were taken from what we were reading. The readings began with *Beowulf*, and so we started by writing mock epics, or we had quotes from *Beowulf* that we would use as prompts. And it went like that all through the year. It was terrific because reading and writing were joined in it and the English literary tradition was not scorned. We started with the very beginnings of English literature and worked our way right on through it. The course was an effective way to be initiated into the process of writing, of letting your imagination claim great literature and use it and not be intimidated by it. Really, I think that course changed my life. I became an English major because of it, but I became a different sort of English major than I would have been without it. I had an excellent fiction-writing course when I was an upperclassman, but it was that sophomore literature Writing Lab that made me truly want to be a writer. It was exhilarating, it was liberating, it was magical. That's what happened at Wesleyan. Then I ended up in the M.F.A. program at UNC-Greensboro and thus began another phase of my life.

LS: By then you already knew that you wanted to write seriously. But going back to another poem in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, even when that girl was in the midst of the harvest, she knew that "one of these days I'll be gone." That line occurs in "Wide Open, These Gates." Talk about that poem a bit since it seems to foresee what would happen once you got to Greensboro.

KSB: One of the interesting things about writing is that you never really know--or probably it's best that you don't know when you begin a poem--where it's going to end up. If you think you know where your poem is going, you're probably in big trouble. Rod Smith, poet and editor of *Shenandoah*, and I were talking via email recently about a particular poet's work, and he said that this writer's poetry never seemed to achieve that discovery in the process of writing that you need for a poem to knock your own head off. As Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." This poem, "Wide Open, These Gates," started out as a mean, nasty poem. I wanted it to be a retort to Garry Wills, who wrote an article in *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "The Plains Truth." It was about Jimmy Carter, and it was making fun of Carter and of southwest Georgia. The article was unnecessarily mean-spirited, mocking the way that people in south Georgia talk, as if we have dirt in our mouths, and saying that we were spiritually overfed and physically underfed. And I thought, "you haven't spent much time in south Georgia." Look at my family: they eat really well! I'm not so sure they're spiritually overfed either. I couldn't figure that out. And then he made fun of a beauty contest he'd attended one night, Miss Macon or something. It was just one thing after another, and I wanted to tell him off. He also made a comment about Jimmy Carter's crabbed youth. So I started the poem intending it as a retort, but it metamorphosed into something else. It ended up being a kind of credo, a "here I stand"--or here I walk and here I sing. It ended up being something else entirely.

LS: Read it for us.

KSB: Did you know Lee was like this, such a taskmaster? (Reads "Wide Open, These Gates") Now that dung beetle that my grandfather aimed spit at, that was Garry Wills.

LS: My brother-in-law and sister-in-law are living in south Georgia now, and they always refer to it as "living below the gnat line."

You studied with Fred Chappell at Greensboro. Was he a good teacher? Was he helpful for you? Who else did you study with, and what work did you encounter that meant a lot to you?

KBS: Well, I took the fiction workshop with Fred, and Fred was an interesting man in his younger days.

LS: In his older days, too!

KSB: Oh, he's very interesting in his older days. Fred has been my mentor and friend for many years. I met Jim Applewhite when I was at Greensboro. Gibbons Ruark was teaching there. Peter Taylor was there my first year. William Pitt Root was also there; then Robert Morgan came in a bit later. It was like a renaissance; all these talented people were there. It was heaven. I can't say that it was the happiest time of my life because that's a stupid thing to say, but I certainly did enjoy it. We had a really good time. As for other influences, I had begun to read James Dickey at Wesleyan and fell in love with his poetry, but I remembered while talking this morning with some friends over breakfast how I also loved W. S. Merwin's early poems, particularly a poem called "Low Fields and Light," which appeared in his third collection, *Green with Beasts*. It was as if the field itself were alive, the way the light moved across it, the long lines, the tone, and I thought, I want to write poetry like this. I want a place to be able to come alive in this way through language. I still get goose bumps, frankly, when I think about that

poem. I even wrote it out in longhand. When I found poems that I especially liked, I used to write them out in my notebook because that was a way of making them mine--and I wanted them to be mine. I wanted to become those poems; I wanted to enter into that language and live there for a while. One of my teachers at Wesleyan, Edward Krickel, who later was the editor of *Georgia Review* for a time, had me reading John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. He was the one who educated me about the Fugitives and the Agrarians, and I came to love Ransom's poetry too, for its craft certainly, but there's so much else to John Crowe Ransom. He's just a wonderful poet and not much read any more, I guess. But he'll come back. As Fred Chappell told me, everything passes and changes. Don't worry about the hierarchy of writers, who's in and who's out, because it all gets reshuffled. He was absolutely right. Cormac McCarthy said the same thing, that the hardest lesson for a writer to learn is not to pay attention to what other writers are doing, in the sense of what they are achieving. Pay attention to what they're doing as artists because you can learn from it, steal from it, whatever, but try not to let yourself feel brought down or inadequate because of what other writers are achieving. You have your own work to accomplish.

As I try to recall other influences, I think of fiction writers. One of the writers whose work was important to me both at Wesleyan and at Greensboro was Eudora Welty. I wanted to write poetry as good as Welty's stories. I wanted to be able to write "The Wide Net." I thought that if I had written "The Wide Net" I could die happy. Or "A Worn Path." Or "Why I Live at the P.O." I just adored--and still adore--her work. Now I'm getting goose bumps again as I think about those wonderful stories. All of these influences were percolating. I hadn't met Lee Smith at that time, so I can't yet claim her as an influence in this chronology.

LS: It's interesting that you mention Eudora Welty because I can see, particularly in the stories that you've cited, a correspondence and resonance between "The Wide Net" and your own *Black Shawl*. Welty's emphasis on narrative and storytelling and community and first-person voices is also evident in your poems. I can see all those qualities coming together in your work as well. It's interesting to me, too, that at about the same time as you felt the influence of Merwin's "Low Fields and Light," with its strong sense of place, you made a big change--you moved to the mountains, a change that clearly had a huge effect on your writing. Few writers are as drawn to place--or as influenced and informed by place--as your work has become, particularly by the mountains. Just about this time you moved to Cullowhee, and you've lived there for many, many years. During that time, a number of actual people whom you've encountered have had a major influence on you, and in contrast to the poets you've mentioned thus far, those people were women. Would you say something about the people you encountered and the kinds of influences you experienced in the mountains?

KSB: I came to the mountains of western North Carolina in 1968 and found, to my great delight, that there were people living there much as we had lived on our farm during my childhood. It was as if they weren't as advanced as we were down in South Georgia, as if they'd been left behind somewhat. They still had their gardens; they still had a bunch of old hound dogs out in the yard. People where I was born had moved up in the realm of dogdom. You didn't see those old ugly bird dogs around so much; they had moved up to collies and cocker spaniels and dogs like that. In the mountains you still saw the old hound dogs, and mules, and workhorses. People seemed more like the folks I remembered from the rural South Georgia of a generation earlier. Right away I began to be fascinated by the music of the mountains. Although

my husband was born and raised in East Tennessee, he can't stand bluegrass; he doesn't like country music. When I was growing up in Georgia, my father would turn on the radio as soon as he got out of bed and drive around in his pick-up truck listening to Hank Williams. I thought it was horrible. I used to think, "Shut up that racket; I hate that music." I wanted to listen to the Platters, or Johnny Mathis, people like that. Or rock and roll, some Elvis Presley. My father liked country music, so I had to hate it, but when I moved to the mountains, I began to really like mountain music. I started finding out about ballads. I started making friends with some mountain women, and they began telling me their stories. One of them was Willa Mae Pressley, a quilter, whose mother Delphia Potts was also a quilter. I became a good friend of a woman named Linda Mathis, who had been raised out on Caney Fork. She told me some hair-raising stories that the whole "Blood Mountain" sequence in *Black Shawl* comes from. A lot of the poems in that book and in *Wildwood Flower* started from specifics that were told to me by these women; I just began to play with those specifics, and out came these poems. I began to be interested in weaving and even took some weaving classes. I fell in love with the names of wildflowers, with the names of quilt patterns, weaving patterns. I read Emma Bell Miles' *The Spirit of the Mountains*, a book that provided source material for *Wildwood Flower*. I started soaking up as much as I could. It took several years for all of that to lead to new poems, though, because most of the time I was working on *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*. I was finishing the poems in that manuscript. I had to achieve a safe distance, I think, before I could write the poems in *Wildwood Flower* and *Black Shawl* in the way I wanted to. We talk about aesthetic distance, and I had to achieve that before I could express what I needed to express. Over a period of years I began to feel more at home in the mountains, so when the voice of Alma appeared to me--just came to me--one day when my husband and I were hiking in the Smokies, I knew it was time. She had germinated long enough. And over the next couple of years that voice became the poems in *Wildwood Flower*.

LS: That was certainly a fortunate move for all of us who are your readers. Yet *Wildwood Flower* is a very different sort of book from your first. I think about your work not only as a kind of metaphorical memoir but also as an everywoman's journey. You have this jubilant young girl singing in the corn, and then you have some other images in *Wildwood Flower* that are far removed from the images we were discussing earlier of harvest and plenitude and connection, images that reflect stories of hard times. The first poems, at least, in *Wildwood Flower* are almost the opposite of those in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest*, the girl who can say, "I am the girl in the midst of the harvest. // I am the harvest." Instead, we get images of promises unfulfilled, images that are the opposite of harvest: the snow and ice and cold. In contrast to the exuberance of "Cornwalking," for instance, at the end of "Banshee" you have the banshee outside the window whispering words of warning and concluding the poem with the line, "All the beautiful cornstalks will fall." Here is something very different suddenly. At the end of "Bittersweet," which is a love poem of mother for daughter, you write, "My sweet songs / have all blown away, / one by one, down the mountain." So there are some different kinds of images coming into the poems; there is loneliness, a lot of loneliness, and a lot of imagery of coldness, relieved from time to time by poems about passion, which suddenly erupt in the book in poems like "Trillium" and "Ivory Combs" and "Burning Wing Gap." Those poems suggest that there's a danger to this passion, the danger of dying alone. Poetry and art offer some consolation for such loss but often an empty consolation. Where are these darker experiences coming from? Are they coming from the real-life stories you heard in the mountains, or are they

an inevitable part of growing older and viewing life more realistically? In any case, there's a very different mood here.

KSB: Something that struck me in a review that Fred Chappell did of *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* was his comment, "She seems to be on glad terms with it all." And I thought, "Well, I'm really not on glad terms with it all." There are other things going on inside the poems in that volume; there are hints, suggestions. I gave a reading in Atlanta from the book before it was published, including the poems "Cornwalking" and "Wide Open, These Gates," and was accosted afterward by an intense young man who said: "The South is not really like that. It's not all light and warmth and harvest. There's a lot of racism, for one thing." And he proceeded to regale me with all the hideous things about the South, as if I somehow didn't know about them. I tried to explain that these were just a few poems, that my outlook on life shouldn't be judged by them alone, but his comments started me thinking. Yes, there were other subjects, and I just had to trust that when the time came for me to take them on, I'd be ready.

One point I want to make in trying to respond to Lee's question is that it's difficult when you're beginning to write to take on your own past, your own memories. There are parts of them that are really difficult to deal with. I was writing about the idyllic, the parts of my childhood that had given me strength, that had given me the mythology I needed to enter into young womanhood. There were other darker things that I wasn't ready to take on. When I got to the mountains and the voice of Alma--this persona, this *mask*--came to me, I was able to address those subjects. I was at a safe remove, so I could put on this mask and take on some of the loneliness, the bitterness, the solitude. I could express it, but in the voice of somebody else.

LS: It's in *Wildwood Flower* that we first come across the image of the black shawl, which later becomes a positive thing, a linking together of women's voices and a finding of community. But when we first encounter that image in *Wildwood Flower*, it's rather scary:

. . . Nights I can't
sleep I hear
wind shove the dead
leaves along like my own
thoughts, those rag
taggle gypsies she sang
about, all of them black
shawled and stealing
away to their dirty
work . . .

In this poem the continuity of women's voices seems something to escape from; they drag the speaker's hands "down," in the poem's final word. Later on, we find the black shawl to be an image that is comforting, that holds us together. But in this earlier book it seems to mark the realization of some of the scarier realities the poems address. In a poem like "Ivy, Sing Ivory" not even the seasons are comforting, and the speaker rails against them and the way we are bound in the seasons. "Like women, the dogwoods go nowhere," the speaker says, expressing her wish for another life. And so we see a lot of negative images, but then the black shawl becomes, in the book of that title, something that enables you to integrate these tough realities into your work and yet celebrate the ability to form communities, to form connections. There are many different women's voices in *Black Shawl*, and readers are able to revel in each one. That is

quite an accomplishment. “Mountain Time,” the book’s opening poem, is a kind of credo. It’s a celebration of the human ability to make connections, to make art, to make poetry, and to appreciate all the wonderfully diverse voices that appear in the book. I think it’s interesting, too, that you say that from here you’re moving into really old age, a direction that does seem to make your books an everywoman’s story, a kind of passage through time on which we can accompany you.

I want to ask you a question about your writing methods. How long does it take for these poems to happen? For any one of them, I mean.

KSB: It’s different for every poem. If I understood the process, I’d write much more.

LS: Do you write every day, for instance?

KSB: No, not any more. I make lots of lists; I jot down “toilet paper,” “salt,” “milk,” whatever. I used to try to write something every day, to keep something going. But when you reach a certain age, you have a lot more going on in your life, and it becomes more difficult to keep that thread going, or even to be aware that the thread is still there. I’ve worked for years on particular poems. But the poems in *Alma* were great; they came quickly. It was as if putting on that mask, that persona, enabled the poems to come forth without my thinking as much about them as I had in my earlier work. Many of the poems that I wrote during that time were spill-over poems that went into *Black Shawl* rather than *Wildwood Flower* because the voice didn’t seem quite like Alma’s so I knew something else was going on in them.

I want to circle back to the black dirt and the roots of “Black Shawl.” Yes, it does seem dark, it’s pulling you down, but at the same time it’s fertile ground. I was reading a lot of Seamus Heaney at the time I was working on both these books, and his poem “Digging” connects his father’s digging in the real ground for potatoes with his own digging with his pen. Sometimes it does seem like you’re trapped on the farm, you’re trapped in the house, but at the same time that experience can be liberating, too, because you’re sinking your roots into that rich soil. I’m speaking metaphorically here. It’s something of a paradox.

For the past three years I’ve been working on poems that grow out of a collaboration with photographer Louanne Watley. The 22 photographs are images of an old woman in her last days, and the poems give voice to that persona. Now I’m moving beyond that voice, going back to South Georgia subjects and working with some of those places, those memories, again, trying to take on some of those tough subjects that the young man in Atlanta thought I was avoiding. I have a sonnet sequence that deals with some of the racial incidents that occurred while I was in high school that are tied up with the whole image of the Confederate flag, which my father has on his truck and hangs from a window in his house. It’s a circling, a revisiting, a spiraling back to that time.

One other thing about the fields that we talked about earlier. At the same time that I was writing those poems with fields in them, I had in the back of my mind a favorite line from Boris Pasternak that I discovered when I was in graduate school. It’s the very last line of a poem whose title I no longer remember. “Life is not a walk across a field,” he wrote. Even as I envisioned the future as a field, I knew that life is not a walk across a field; it’s not that simple. That recognition was always there, even amid the celebration. There’s both praise and lament. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke talks about the way in which those two impulses intertwine, and I was reading a lot of Rilke at that time--still read a lot of Rilke. Praise and

lament are bound together in ways you can never really separate. They are inextricably interfused in just about everything we do.

LS: We'll end with one last question that I think is pertinent to all of us. You've mentioned having difficulty concentrating, and I've noticed myself that since the events of September 11, I've been particularly unable to concentrate. But I've also noticed that friends keep faxing me and emailing me poems. The first things I received after those attacks were poems. You've touched several times on the importance of poetry in troubled times, and in times of personal turbulence as well. Last night when you talked about your poem "Visiting Poet," which you wrote soon after the events at Columbine High School, you referred to standing confused, wondering what poetry could say in a time of disaster. I wonder if you've thought any further on this issue, particularly lately. What *can* poetry say in a time of disaster? Obviously, it's something, or we wouldn't have had this flood of poems in our emails on September 12.

KSB: There's a temptation in the current poetry scene to say that poetry *can't*. I believe our national poet laureate suggested as much, that poetry just could not take on such a subject, that it was too large for us. That view would be foreign to Shakespeare or Milton or Yeats or any number of our major poets and might make them wonder how this fellow got to be poet laureate if that's the way he feels about poetry. This is when we need poetry the most. When you think of the spontaneous overflow of emotion into language that comes with the writing of a lyric poem, September 11 clearly prompted such overflow. Think of how you felt when you saw those events occurring, that overflow of horror, of strong emotion. Poetry needs to be there--and is there. It's true that I haven't written anything, aside from a few rough jottings, in response to September 11; I've only made a lot of scuppernong jelly in my kitchen. But we cannot banish poetry from these huge issues in our lives, and certainly if we do, we must not complain that no one reads poetry any more because it has become irrelevant. We've helped to make it irrelevant if we don't rise to the challenge of expressing our grief, our anger, our outrage through poetry. We just can't let that happen.

Note: Lee Smith, who conducted this interview, is the author of twelve novels, a novella, and three collections of short fiction. Born and raised in Grundy, Virginia, she has lived in North Carolina since 1974. In 1984 she won the North Carolina Award for Literature, the highest honor this state bestows. Ms. Smith has launched the careers of a number of writers through her years teaching in the creative writing program at North Carolina State University. She lives with her husband, the writer Hal Crowther, in Hillsborough. The interview took place at a celebration of Kathryn Byer's work in October, 2001, at Emory & Henry College, in Emory, Virginia--one of the college's ongoing series of annual literary festivals celebrating a writer with strong ties to southern Appalachia. It is reprinted from The Iron Mountain Review 18 (spring 2002) with permission of the magazine, which holds the copyright.