

“THE AFRICAN WORLD
AND LANDSCAPE IS OUR
POINT OF DEPARTURE –
ITS RIVERS, ITS MYTHS,
ITS DRUMS AND PASSIONS
OF LOVE, THE ELEMENTAL
INVOCATIONS TOWARD
THE ULTIMATE RITUAL
OF RESTORATION.”
—Kofi Awoonor (1935–2013)

A Second LIFE to Tell the FIRST



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN TAM

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER AND ELAINE NEIL ORR in Conversation

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER (KAY) served as North Carolina's first woman poet laureate from 2005 to 2010. Her poetry, prose, and fiction have appeared in such venues as *Poetry*, *The Atlantic*, *Georgia Review*, and *Shenandoah*. Her first book of poetry, *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (Texas Tech University Press, 1986) was originally published in the AWP Award Series and reissued by Press 53 in 2013. Her most recent collection, *Descent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014), received the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, as well as the Southern Independent Booksellers Award in Poetry. Byer was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2012 and the honoree of the North Carolina Writers Conference in 2014. A native of south Georgia, she came to North Carolina for graduate school and earned an MFA from UNC Greensboro in 1968. She now lives in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

Literature has been called “the great conversation,” and just as we converse with the books that have transformed our lives, we converse with their authors as well, no matter the distance of time or culture. But to be able to converse with a living author whom one admires and considers a friend is one of the riches of being a part of a vital literary community. What follows is such a conversation between two of those participants, novelist and memoirist Elaine Neil Orr and me, poet Kathryn Stripling Byer. It began with my intention to interview her for *NCLR*'s global North Carolina issue, but within, she also, to some extent, interviews me – hence a conversation more so than a traditional interview.