



Light Defines Us (watercolor, 11x30) by Elizabeth Ellison

WRITING THE Interior Landscape: AN INTERVIEW WITH *George Ellison*

Together we'll arise into the iron morning
and dress by the light in our fingertips
bearing little else but indifference
and never looking back even once we'll
whistle the river's favorite tune about
elegant mountains and faraway oceans

—George Ellison, "In Every Direction"



ABOVE George Ellison

Art and photography courtesy
of George and Elizabeth Ellison,
except where otherwise noted.

by Kathryn Stripling Byer

with art by Elizabeth Ellison

Since 1973, George Ellison has lived near Bryson City, in the mountains of western North Carolina, adjacent to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Since 1968 I've lived just over the mountain, so to speak, in southern Jackson County, my house a short hike away from Western Carolina University. We have been friends for over thirty years. Though only a half hour's drive over the mountains from each other, we might never have made contact if not for George's little magazine *Unaka Range*, which published some of my work in the 1970s. Back then, George wrote poetry, but as the years passed, he became more engaged in writing about the natural history of the Blue Ridge region, as well as the life and writings of Horace Kephart, author of *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913). George's essays often approach lyricism in their sensory awareness of the landscape around us. George ranks among those naturalist writers who are doing the most important work in our national literature: Barry Lopez, Janisse Ray, and Chris Camuto come to mind. George Ellison certainly ranks among them.

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER was the Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 2005 to 2009 and the winner of the prestigious North Carolina Award for Literature in 2001. Her latest collection of poems, called *Descent*, is forthcoming from LSU Press in fall 2012. For more information, see James Smith's interview with her in *NCLR* 2008, and for a sample of her fiction as well as poetry, see *NCLR* 2010.