

Interview with George Ella Lyon *Final ed from*
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At the home of Ms. Lyon, Lexington Kentucky
Interviewer: Chris Green

Green: I read one of your essays on "literature as a healing force" and it says that poetry "as a healing art, brings to life the connection between body and spirit, concrete and abstract, individual and universal. This is what good poetry does, no matter what its mood or message. Through metaphor, it shows the wholeness of creation and offers us, at least temporarily, a way back". So, what I want to discuss are the external structures which allow the poetry to be communicated, and specifically, I want to focus on Pine Mountain Sand and Grave. I want to talk about your part and your story and the structures which surround it and surround its process. So hopefully what I'll do is set you rambling.

Lyon: Was that from the Good Foods' Co-op News Letters?

Green: No, it was from the UK Archives in the Grass Roots poetry project.

Lyon: Is that the proposal?

Green: No, it was just this little piece of torn up type paper stuck in there.

Lyon: I can't believe somebody is looking at this, that's hilarious.

Green: Oh, it's entirely wonderful to look at this. Things you never thought that you would ever see again.

Lyon: No, I never thought anybody else would ever see. I couldn't believe that they wanted it; I was just glad, as you see I need something to do with all this stuff. I'm not very good at matter management. And I keep producing more and more and more and more. You know, I think about getting one of those huge out buildings in the backyard and just wheelbarrow all this stuff out there. Okay, so where do you want me to start?

Green: We can start with a bit of personal history, I guess. Something so we can fit your life into this, where you went to school and what you were doing. Just a real brief outline.

Lyon: I grew up in Harlan, in the coalfields of the state, and went to Harlan High School and started writing when I was just a kid, you know, second grade and had a couple of good teachers and friends in high school who encouraged my writing, and I started submitting things then. In fact, the first thing I had published was a poem in the Sunday school magazine that was botched, but I published an article when I was in high school in Sing Out, the folk song magazine, because I was really interested in music. I went to Centre College and from there to the University of Arkansas and from there to Indiana University.

I wanted to go to graduate school in creative writing and applied all over the country, but I didn't get accepted. Except IU, but IU wouldn't give you a teaching Fellowship unless you had an MA, so I went to Arkansas and got

an MA, then I could get a teaching Fellowship at IU but I couldn't get in the writing program because they wouldn't let me get another MA because then it would say MAMA after my name. So I got a PhD, but I did a minor in creative writing and I studied there with Sam Yellen and Ruth Stone. Ruth was real important to me as a writer because she helped me see that it was both in her teaching and her inner writing, that it wasn't only possible, but it was crucial for me to write as a woman and that I had experiences that I had not read about when majoring in English.

So that was really important for me, but also important for me was meeting a guy named Michael Allen in the writing program there. He and I have just gotten back in touch with each other these many years. He was an Ohio poet and who wrote about everyday things and rural, Ohio things and yet was a very sophisticated and well-read person; but he was writing about his roots, and I didn't feel I could do this. Having grown up in Eastern Kentucky, I was trying to sound like I was from someplace else. I had the notion and I think, I think a lot of kids growing up there today still have the notion, that culture is someplace else and that if you're from the mountains that's something to overcome.

In some ways the war on poverty reinforced this notion because the eyes of the nation were directed on Eastern Kentucky, and we saw images of ourselves on TV and in the news as a culturally deprived as well as economically depressed area. On one level I knew that there were many ways in which that wasn't true, but it still took me a long time to come back to that as my own center. And what happened was, when I met Michael, he and Ruth both influenced my writing; and then when we left Indiana at the beginning of 1975 we moved to Nashville so Steve started writing country music and I began to read writing from the Appalachian region. I found a magazine called The Small Farm, edited by Jeff Daniel Marion. He was living at that time in New Market, Tennessee, Dandridge.

Anyway, I sent Danny some poems and wrote him a letter and he wrote me this wonderful letter back which I still have which was the first real connection I had with a writer who thought of himself as Appalachian and who was a part of all this writing that I didn't even know existed. Now I knew about James Still, I knew about Jesse Stewart, I knew of Harriet Arnow. I didn't connect them with each other, and I didn't know that they were not alone and I didn't know that there were Appalachian writers before them and that there were Appalachian writers since them and that there was a live literary tradition. I didn't know that. I'd never been taught and I hadn't known how to go look for it. And magazines such as Appalachian Journal and Appalachian Heritage were getting started at this time, they hadn't been there.

So, Danny was real encouraging to me. He wound up publishing some of Michael's poems, Michael Allen, and several people I was in school with at IU sent poems to him and had them put in The Small Farm. I tried to get IU to let me do a creative dissertation, a book of poems and stories set in the mountains, but they wouldn't do it. So I did my dissertation on E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, which was a good experience: but I knew by then that I had these things that I wanted to write and I didn't quite know how to do it. I didn't know how to find connections in a focus and I didn't have confidence and how to make a living and I was having a baby, so just a few things were going on. The day I found out I was pregnant, Steve found out that he could keep his job, but he wouldn't get paid anymore so that was a big day and consequently we moved Lexington. We moved here because we knew this area and Steve was interested in opening a recording studio and it looked like a good place to do that, and there were a lot of teaching opportunities around here. So we moved in February of '76 and Ben was born in August and then the next

year I started teaching part-time at UK, teaching freshman comp, and I did that and continued writing and taught also at Centre and taught at Transy.

The next big jump for me, in terms of writing, was in 1980 when Gurney Norman came to town, and I can't thank any of these people enough because Gurney was a God send to me. He had just come to teach at UK and he along with John Stephenson, then director of the Appalachian Center, applied to the Witter Bynner Foundation for money to do the Appalachian Poetry Project and Gurney needed somebody to be the Executive Director: that's what I was. I don't know how Gurney found me, maybe through the English department. I was publishing poems around and about, but he convinced me that I could do this.

What I had to do, which was just the perfect thing for me to have to do, was make contacts with writers throughout the five states of the southern region as part of the SAWC network. I had not been a part of that early Southern Appalachians Co-operative <SAWC>. But that network had sort of come loose and it hadn't reached into all these areas; it was more dormant, I should say, than come loose. But the hope with the Appalachian Poetry Project was that through Bob Henry Baber coordinating the workshops in all the states led by local writers and through my reading through the Appalachian collection, looking for writers, contacting them, telling them what we were doing, making big mailing lists and beginning the anthology that we would find one another and we would take what community was there and enrich and diversify it.

So that's what I did. I got to spend all this time reading and writing to writers and I helped manage the finances and so forth, although the Appalachian Center, thank God, did the bookkeeping.

Throughout that year I went to a lot the workshops, helped sign people up to do the workshops, and just met people. I had my eyes open to what a live literature was going on right now and I began to research, to read backwards, to where all this is coming from. I met people who knew a lot more than I did and people who knew even less than I did and so I was able to learn from and share all this excitement.

The anthology we put together out of that has not been published, but it's been used, it's been used in teaching, it's been xeroxed and used.

Green: I've had parts of it in courses.

Lyon: Have you? It's not bound but it's not buried either. We had some bad experiences with publishers, but it's hard to get a book that big published; it's hard when you have three editors and over time your concept of what the book might be changes, you all change and the project changes. The anthology was sort of one thing when it represented the spirit of that project, but that's ten years ago. Now, there's another Appalachian anthology on the way. I don't know if you know about that, edited by a woman named Marita Garin. She can tell you a lot.

And so Gurney and John Stephenson all at the Appalachian Center, we were wonderfully in, just plugging me into this whole community. I went to the Appalachian Studies Conference that year and met Cratis Williams; it was a homecoming.

All this time I was writing but writing mostly poetry and some essays, and in 1983 I had a book of poems accepted called "Mountain"; it's a chap book. That was after eleven years I had been sending out poems, and what I finally did was take the book which had three sections and just took the sections apart and sent them out so that the first section called "Mountain" was published by itself. That was real important to me, although the book is just stapled and everything, to have a book is such a thing. That confirmed

to me in a real important way, and the next year I had a picture book accepted. Since then I've been able to write and sell books, but I've gotten into playwriting and working on this adult novel that I read from that day, which was just rejected yesterday.

Green: Where are you trying to publish?

Lyon: I sent it to Algonquin Books out of Chapel Hill; I don't know if you know their books. They publish Kay Gibbons and Leon Driskell and Clyde Edgerton, a number of really fine, new southern voices. The editor, Shannon Ravenal, was interviewed on NPR back in the summer and the way she talked about voice and what she looks for in reading the script, I thought maybe she might like this. So I sent the prologue, just about thirty pages and they kept it for two months and sent it back.

Green: When you were in graduate school, did you have support from your family and friends in your writing? Or was that something that you found later on?

Lyon: No, I had wonderful support in my family for whatever I wanted to try to do. It was not child prodigy kind of stuff. I remember once when I was little and got this notion that I wanted to paint and so for Christmas I got all kinds of paint stuff, so I could try to paint. There was a woman in Loyal who taught art lessons in the summer so I went to her house and just a few kids were there, but I had art lessons. I took piano lessons and voice lessons and I played the guitar and sang and played the dulcimer and I wrote songs, performed around. As I said, I had teachers in high school who encouraged my writing and my parents didn't pry into it, but it was never something I felt like I should do. Both of my parents were readers and interested in ideas and books, so it really was pretty natural. My daddy kept a journal; my granddaddy, at times, kept a journal.

Green: Have you ever, by chance, gone back and read it?

Lyon: Well, I found my granddaddy's journal recently and when my grandmother died five years ago. I got her recipe books and I was going through them and I found that the recipes had been pasted in an old yearbook, you know day book, and I thought what a strange thing for her to paste these in here and I began to lift the recipes up, and my grandfather's journal was under there.

She had pasted the recipes over what he had written, which is a whole other story that she would do this; there wasn't a whole lot in there of the ones that I could get off, he didn't write every day. But the fact that he wrote really meant a lot to me. He went to maybe the fourth grade.

And he had the impulse to set things down. I knew he wrote letters because I have seen a few letters that he wrote; but to write a letter because the occasion called for it is one thing, but to write a journal because you want to keep a record is something else again. My father's journals I haven't seen. Well, I have seen into a lot of them and I know a lot of the people. It was one place that he kept financial records and ideas he had or his business interests, but I don't know what else is in there. Since my father died four years ago, I haven't asked my mother if I could see them, I'm waiting I don't know when it will be O.K. to do that. But I know one year for Father's Day I gave him the kind of journal that I had been using at that time. When I first got them they costed \$3.95, the last one I looked at was \$19.95.

Green: So what do you use now, then? Do you just use scrap paper?

Lyon: No, although I'm much less bound than I used to be. It used to be that it was just wonderful to have everything all bound together. I have a little pocketbook journal now. This is my current journal. I just ordered it out of a catalog. Pier 1 has good journals.

I use those kinds of books both for journals and poems when I was writing a lot of poetry; but now that I write only prose, I just write on legal pads. And those are the worksheets that I get to the computer.

Green: The age of the computer has arrived everywhere.

Lyon: I don't work directly on the computer, though. It's so much smarter and faster than I am. I feel like I put on a false voice to try and impress it. I feel like it's humming, keeps humming there and I just don't know the words yet and it already knows the tune and I just put down anything so it will be satisfied: it'll have something to do. The computer is like chess when it's always your move.

Green: It's waiting for you to begin.

Lyon: And hardly ever do I get ahead of it. I don't understand the process. I mean, I'm the one that says processing. Down, the writer is down. So I don't get over there until I've got some paper to lean on. But I know writers who say they love the word processor because it's as fast as they think. I must not think that fast. I like it because it's a little slower. You get a lot more done. Okay, let's see have I strayed too far from it.

Green: Okay, no, this isn't too far--just your rambling--is exactly what I'm looking for. See, part of what I'm getting is that the literature that we're looking at is much more than just the literature. That it's a person behind the literature and literature is the tip of an iceberg and it embodies, to me, an invitation to explore and look and connect and to think and it doesn't stand by itself.

I want to get theoretical here now and engage your theoretical intellect and what I want to talk about is looking at one of these places where all of these poems come together. Gurney wrote in the first Mountain Review, he was talking about mountain media, about how the new media was this great new chance for people to get together and talk to each other, and I was wondering how you think about things like The Small Farm and Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel as places where people have gotten together for a dialogue and the poems and stories inside of are talking to one another and forming a community which is representative also of these people. Do you have that sort of sense of it, and if not what sort of sense do you have?

Lyon: I have a sense of some magazines that way, not all of them because not all of them do I have that many layered connections with. Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel very often I would know the work of, if not actually the people, of everybody in there. So there's already a dialogue that this continues and confirms. What I felt in reading The Small Farm, which when I first read it I didn't know anybody in there, was that this was news from the home that I was reading, not in the sense of what's going on visibly, but news in terms of how people are looking at things and what they are thinking and how they are remembering and what they are learning. Very often the pieces in a magazine,

if it's well put together, will say more together than they do by themselves because you can actually see things expanded on or things in counterpoint with the magazine.

Green: Do you feel that happened to your piece "The Writer and the Community"¹ and Gurney and Lance's interview theme juxtaposed together?

Lyon: I think that made an interesting and surprising combination.

Green: Was it news to you when you saw it?

Lyon: I knew about Gurney's and Lance's piece, I hadn't read it. Gurney had talked about it, but I didn't know what it was going to be like, knowing Gurney I knew I couldn't predict what it was going to be like. But I did think it was real interesting and I think that the thing about Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel is that it's very diverse and one of its aims is to be surprising and that keeps it lively and challenges our assumptions of what Appalachian is, of what subject matter for a poem is, of what form is. That we should have a magazine like that in the region is real important.

This backs up a little bit to the first question. One thing that came out of the poetry project was the meeting at the Highlander Center. I don't know if you heard about that. There was one this fall, I didn't get to go, but we started an Appalachian Writer's meeting at the Highlander Center in Newport, Tennessee. I guess the first one that must have been in the fall '80 or the fall of '81, I'm not sure, but there came together a lot of these writers who had never met each other. That's where I met Jo Carson who's a wonderful person, who changed my life and my writing. And many of the people who were there that year or subsequent years have seen their work appear in magazines together, like Now and Then or Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, have also furthered one another's work. Like Jim Webb was at that first gathering so he went on to do Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, Jo Carson is poetry editor for Now and Then.

So when those people become in the position that they can publish, they know people to solicit work, or work to look for. Then out of those literary gatherings comes a gathering of print that takes that circle and paginates it and then sends it out and new circles are formed that way.

And I think that's real important. The Highlander meeting was one of the reincarnations of SAWC and then the continuation of it.

Green: Does it continue on through?

Lyon: Yeah, they haven't been every year. There was one this year, the focus was censorship, which is very timely.

Green: In your Grassroots Poetry Project you were saying that you went out to the schools and to a completely different audience of poetry and literature than would be reading, say Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel and there's a different audience for Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel than for Now and Then. I mean because of the different sorts of material presented. And so, I guess I'm interested in knowing your sense of the audience that you were reaching to when you've published pieces in Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel.

1. See Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, Number 3.

Lyon: I think of Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel as reaching more of a literary audience say than Now and Then, which may reach a more general or sociologically interested audience in that it presents all kinds of non-fiction articles about different issues depending on the focus of that number of the magazine. So in a way, I think, about Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel as reaching other writers around the region, keeping in touch in that way. I wish it would be taken up and used in the classroom. I mean that would be great in high school English classes and college English classes.

Green: I had an interesting discussion with my old AP English teacher in my senior year and I was approaching her about using regional literature as part of the study, and she said it's not good literature. And I thought, 'oh, my gosh, here it is, this is part of the problem to overcome.' Were you able to overcome that with the Grassroots poetry Project?

Lyon: In some ways I think I was. I certainly ran into those very barriers, immediately, the first time out. I knew I was trying to change something, obviously, otherwise there was no need to do it. I knew I was trying to interest people in a new way of teaching and giving the materials and even lesson plans or exercises with which to do it. So I knew that it was new in that way. I knew that too, for the most part, outsiders of the region, this might be suspicious because if it's regional literature, in a sense regional equals minor, equals not very good.

I didn't know, I should have known, but I didn't know that I would run into that same attitude in some of the teachers, and that in addition to that, I would run into a resistance because they felt to teach poetry, which was not grammatically correct or which tried to capture the speech that they had heard every day was going against their mission as teachers, which is to get these kids not to sound like this. So, I remember the first workshop I did where I read some of Jo Carson's People Pieces. First of all, they said, it's not poetry. I was prepared for that one.

Green: How did you reply to that?

Lyon: I talked about what I thought poetry was and that poetry didn't have to rhyme and that, as all speech has rhythm and we naturally use images, poetry is just an intensification of that. I forget who it is who said that there's not that much difference between walking and dancing: when are you walking and when are you dancing? When are you speaking and when is it a poem? But they just weren't sure that something that close to home, that familiar could be art. And, of course, they had this notion of poetry as being unapproachable and in many cases obscure and so there was a lot of work to do. But as I say I was prepared for that, but I wasn't prepared for them to say, "You can't have a poem with the word ain't in it. You can't have a poem where the verb and subject don't agree because if my students see that that's all right in

1. A project developed by George Ella Lyon to bring regional poetry into Eastern Kentucky Schools and to encourage the writing of literature through holding seminars. For more complete information of this project see the University of Kentucky Archives under the Grass Roots Poetry Project, excellent source of background literature.

literature, then how am I ever going to convince them that it's not right on their English paper?"

And I asked them, "Do you think your students", junior high and high school students, "Do you think they talk the same way to their friends that they talk to you?" And they didn't know. I said, "Do you think that they talk about different things or do they use different language?" They said well, they talk about different things and they use different language. I said, "Ah, ha. How about when they talk to their parents? Do they talk exactly the way to their parents that they talk to you?" Well, probably not. So you see, they've got different languages already. They already know about that. They may not be conscious of it, but they know different ways to use language and it's possible to teach what standard English is without saying the way you see it is wrong and without killing the pleasure of a language. How are you going to enable a student to write if you tell them they can't talk they way they talk? In other words, if you cut off their voice, then you say now write it doesn't work. And that was really my main point in the whole thing.

Green: How did they respond to that?

Lyon: There were different responses. But not too long ago, I was back, doing a teacher workshop at Hindman Settlement School and I ran into a woman who said, "You probably don't remember me." And I didn't. She said she was in my workshop in Leslie County in 1980 and that it really changed her teaching and she'd been using and looking for Appalachian materials ever since. It seems to be a much different approach and it made her feel much more effective as a teacher and she'd also started writing.

And suddenly she felt it was okay to write about what she wanted to write about, you know, the way that she wanted to write about it. And there were good stories like that out of it. But I certainly, I know there were some people who went away unconvinced and probably didn't ever do anything like that. Also, I made the teachers write in workshops and things like that.

Green: Something they weren't used to.

Lyon: No, they weren't used to it and I remember what one person said when I wanted them to share something. I said you don't have to read what you wrote, but I do want everybody to say something about what they wrote--what it's about or whether it surprised you. And this woman said, "Listen, you can't expect them to do that. Not in front of our peers." And I said, "How do you think your students feel?" And she said, "Oh." So I felt that that was a good moment because it put her in that position: she was the student and found out about risking. And, of course, you can't mess up in front of others if you're so concerned about every spelling of every word and writing in perfect grammar or standard grammar. Somebody said standard English is a dialect with an army and a navy.

So this fear was exposed. I thought that was pretty important to point out. I mean, I mean it's not a moral issue, but it's treated as a moral issue.

It really is. I remember an argument in my civics class in high school when a boy was giving an oral report and he said something like "Atter the Constitutional Convention" and the teacher told him, "It's not atter it's after." And he said atter and she said after, he said it's atter and they went on like this for a long time and he was standing up in the aisle and finally she said, "You will not leave this classroom until you say after." And he

said, "My daddy said atter and my granddaddy said atter and I'm going to say atter." And at the time I thought, 'This is so stupid, why doesn't he say after?' But when I look back on it I think what a great fight.

Green: Yeah. He's standing up against the giant machine.

Lyon: Yeah. Against, against the whole culture there he stood. And they were deadlocked until the bell rang and it took up the whole rest of the class. But she wouldn't give an inch and he wouldn't either and none of us really knew what was going on. It was years before I saw what was going on.

Green: Where did "The Writer and the Community" come from?

Lyon: Let's see. I had a job with Kentucky Humanities Counsel on their speaker's bureau. I applied to be one of their speakers. Do you know how that works?

Green: No, I don't.

Lyon: You get listed in their brochure as a speaker for the year. You have to propose two or three speeches that you could give and then people all over the state can use this if they need a speaker. I once spoke in bowling alleys. I had to wait, try to make the line breaks coincide with the ball hitting the pins.

"The Writer and the Community" was one of the things I proposed. I just knew that I wanted to write about that issue of artists as both seen as priceless and seen as worthless and about the dilemma of the artist in a market economy. I had a book which I quote a lot in there, it's called The Gift by Lewis Hyde, it's a great book.

It's a book that was important to me, I read it in 1983 and I've been reading it ever since. I first saw an essay from it in Co-evolution Quarterly. But I wanted to meditate on his ideas at some length, and deal with some of my own experiences, such as the one with which the essay begins where my god-daughter says she wants to be an artist, but artists didn't make enough money; and such as the fact that people will ask you to come and give a reading or do a workshop for free. They call you up and they say they'd be so honored to have you come and they have sixty-five people lined up at this. When they would never ask someone to come and cut hair for free. They would never call up the hair salon and say, "We just love the way you cut hair. Would you please cut that many people's hair? We have sixty-five people." Or even, "Would you come and give us a demonstration?"

Green: Or go to a movie theater and say, "We heard that this movie is so wonderful."

Lyon: "We'd love to see it." Joseph-Beth book sellers asked me to come out there and do three hour-and-a-half workshops with school kids. Could you come and do it? And when I wouldn't do it, they wouldn't believe me. I'll come do a book signing and I don't expect to get paid for that, but I'm not going to go work all day at Joseph Beth for free. They're not going to give away the books that they sell. Everybody out there is getting paid. It just seems bizarre to me that they thought I was going to do this.

Green: I haven't really thought about it.

Lyon: That's one reason I wrote the essay, because I think that's so important and ironically the last time I gave that talk, I was to give it and for a book club and the woman in charge called me up and said I hope you don't mind but we want you to come an hour and a half early because we've arranged for you to also speak to school children and do an autographing. And I said, "Who will pay me for that?". She said, "Oh, well, we can't pay you, we just set that for you to do." Well, I did it because the school kids were all ready, they set up a writing contest or something and they were giving away four copies of one of my pictures and so I didn't feel I could say no. I didn't want to disappoint the kids, but it really was not fair, you know. This was also an hour drive back and forth so it wound up taking most of the day as opposed to taking the afternoon, plus I had to prepare what I did for the school kids. I must say that after the woman heard the talk of "The Writer and the Community" she was most apologetic. She said, "I had no idea what I was doing when I just made those other arrangements." I was glad that she understood that.

Green: It seems like the people go out for entertainment and where we go for entertainment is our television sets, to our radios: and it's free, it's there for us. You don't realize that it's being paid for out of peoples' pockets.

Lyon: Yeah, it is so hard to get people to contribute to Public Radio, they think, "I can get it, why should I --

Green: Why should I pay for it. And commercials don't support it. It's not sucking money off of the population of America.

Lyon: This is one reason that hoping about the grant applications¹ is so confusing because I know how hard these people are struggling to have a living and I really support people who are choosing the economically hardest way, which is to free-lance, in order to try to do some serious work. And so, in part, I tend to say give it to this person because they're risking everything rather than to someone who is say an attorney and wants six months off. But I realize that that is also my bias.

Green: Was your experience with your artistic life different when you weren't in school and teaching and in the last ten years when you've been working as a free lance writer and taking jobs as you can find them?

Lyon: I last taught at UK in '86, and I taught at Transy last fall, but that was an exception. Most of my jobs are directly writing or speaking to school kids and teachers in libraries now, things that grow out of my being a children's writer. It's very different and I am grateful, I'm so grateful. There are things I miss about being on campus, but I don't miss having my life pulled in so many directions. It's pulled enough directions as it is, but I just get to write a lot more. And that's the thing I most want to do.

I think more complicated things come to me because there's more room for them to come and because I have gotten, over the past five years, so much information as a writer that enables me to take on more complex things. I

1. George Ella Lyon was reviewing applications for grants from the The Kentucky Foundation for Women.

miss the colleges, you know, passing time in people's offices and drinking coffee with people in the morning. And I always learn from teaching, I always learn from my students; but then I do a lot of teaching all the time anyway. I don't even know how many schools I've been in this fall. I know there's twenty-seven next spring. Which is too many. I know it hasn't been that many this fall. I have said "No".

Green: Did it take you a long time to learn how to say no?

Lyon: Oh, did I tell you that on the receiver on the phone downstairs I have a sign that says Just Say No?

Green: No.

Lyon: Yeah, to the drug of income. Which is especially hard when you're, as Steve and I are, free-lancing: it's very hard not to take any job that comes along. Especially since we are both doing it and we have two children.

Green: Have you ever gone through a time when neither of you could find work? Is that fear always underneath you, the fear of that collapse?

Green: There is that, yeah, there is that fear. And there's the fear of mild, less extreme versions of that. Such as work will diminish somewhat and then some crisis will come up, some financial crisis, and we won't be able to do it. We recently have gone through something like that. My mother-in-law has Alzheimer's and she was in Florida and the home she was in was not adequate for her care. She needed more care, and we couldn't get her to Kentucky fast enough so that she had to go into a home that she couldn't afford down there. We had to borrow money in order just to keep her going because she was running out of money, and she couldn't get Medicaid down there. The laws are different in every state and it had just got into this huge thing. Ordinarily, we don't borrow money because when you don't have a regular income the last thing you want to do is borrow money. But we did and so there are those fears, but at the same time it would be really stupid and self-defeating to live with this kind of uncertainty and then take so many jobs that you can't do any of the work that you're living with this uncertainty in order to do. So, it's always a balancing act and sometimes we do better at it than other times.

Green: But you're always learning how to do better at it?

Lyon: Well, yeah, I hope so. We're always learning something. You know, sometimes things are falling apart, sometimes they're falling together, sometimes they're just falling.

Green: Hopefully they won't hit the bottom too fast.

Lyon: Hopefully there's someone down there to send it back up. I really can't imagine doing it another way. I consider myself real lucky. Because to make it as an artist you have to have a lot of support. You have to have a gift which is not in your control. You have to have a lot of support. You have to nurture it and you have to work really hard and you also have to have some luck, and I feel as though I have that.

Green: What I'd also like to do is get you reading something on tape. And an appropriate piece would be something out of the first Pine Mountain

Sand and Gravel. I had it marked. My markers got away.

Lyon: So is that all of them together?

Green: This is a collection of the first part of my research data, this is gathering materials and surrounding documents and so this is two Pine Mountain Sand and Gravels and tons of other magazines and essays and interviews and all kinds of stuff.

Lyon: What a great resource.

Green: It was real fun putting it together but now I keep finding more stuff that should be, should be in there. Okay, okay. We'll find it. See page 33. Here are this one.

Lyon: "A Visit". Oh, yes. I read this at the Women Writers Conference one year. This really happened. Well, not exactly like this, but it came out of a real visit. Okay, shall I just launch into it?

Green: Just ride on off that motorcycle.

Lyon: "A Visit"

I was securing the pin in the diaper
when someone banged on the door
and it was this guy
in an orange fish-net Florida interstate
T-shirt
holding his bike helmet and saying,

Hi, I'm the muse.

You?

Yeah, name's Floyd.

Well, come on in, I'm in the middle
of a bunch of things.

Best place to begin. Now. . .

No, I mean I'm fixing dinner,
my little boy's awake and. . .

Lady, Lady, Lady,
you'll never get off the fucking ground like that.
What are you cooking?

Millet.

God, the Lady eats like a bird.
Honey, you got to have meat to make poems,
takes blood to make blood sing.

Be that as it may. . .

I can see you're not serious.
You got anything to drink?

Beer.

That'll do.

* * *
Here you go. You know
it came to me in the kitchen:
with you here maybe I could
do some work. Dinner's ready for the oven,
My little boy has been changed--
Could you watch him a while?

The MUSE?
The MUSE a fucking baby-sitter?
Who do you think you are?
I'm sacred, remember?
I'm holy shit. . .

Well, how are you going to help me
sucking on that bottle of beer?

Baby, I can take you to Bliss City
in one spin of my machine.
When I'm finished, you'll be so inspired
your tits will blow up balloons.

Great. What about my son?

Ditch the kid a while.
You can't fool around
wiping asses
when I'm ready to fly.

Fly? What about writing?
Remember words,
those heavy things?

Jeez, she's climbing on her soapbox.
Go on then, who cares?
Scrape life your from mayonnaise jars.
You won't see me again.

Promise?

Green: What's the story behind that one?

Lyon: There are a couple of stories. One is that I went to a reading at UK. Well, that baby was who came in here a few minutes ago, so it's been a while. And I heard a poet, a male poet, talk about the muse. Talk about waiting on the muse and when the muse comes to go for it. And I thought, Jeez, I have to wait on the muse. I mean, I haven't got the luxury of waiting on the muse and it seemed such a contrast between the male notion of the artist where things

are so pliant and quiet and peaceful. The writer is taken seriously and given room and someone brings the tea or the whiskey or whatever and the writer goes off and lives an isolated life.

And the woman trying to create something who is right in the middle of everything going and coming. Besides, the woman is not supposed to be the artist, the woman is supposed to be the muse; if she gets involved in this scenario at all. And so I got to thinking about that so that got me started working on this poem. I was thinking, Boy if I had a muse, with my luck, this is the kind of muse that I would get. It would be Floyd, and he'd be just as egotistical as this poet had seemed to be. 'What I need is not a muse but childcare', was my notion.

The irony of it, too, was that when I was working on this poem I was taking part in a writer's group, we met maybe twice a month in the evening and it involved several people, some connected with UK, some not, male and female. But the night I read this poem it was at my house and I was the last person to read and I read the poem and in the middle of the poem Ben woke up and I had to leave the group to go take care of him and when I came back only two people were left because it was late, two of the men in the group, and they had decided that the muse was just not sexy enough--that I really needed to develop the muse in this poem. I thought that was hilarious because that wasn't the point and they hadn't seen the irony that I had to leave to do exactly what the poem was talking about, that I was in that situation at this moment. They looked at it kind of like that. So anyway that's where the poem came from.

Green: The poem proves itself in action.

Lyon: Right.

Green: I'm not so sure it's difficult to write a poem flying out amongst the imaginative clouds as it is to write one that talks to your life where it is and, and moves it on some place else.

Lyon: And with that one I remember struggling not to make it didactic in a way that would kill the poem--that it could be light-hearted in a way.

Green: Right.

Lyon: That the humor could be there. Trying to find the voices, trying to the pitch the voice was what I kept struggling with.

Green: Well, I think it worked pretty well. I showed it to the woman I live with and we are always having trouble balancing out work and school and getting everything done and I was reading and trying to fight out time to go some reading through these Pine Mountain Sand and Gravels and I ran across this.

Lyon: This is real life.

Green: Let's see, is there anything else that you would like to say or talk about?

Lyon: Have you seen a piece I did called "Literature In Its Place"¹?

Green: No, I haven't.

Lyon: It came out in a magazine called Mossy Creek Journal, which I don't even myself have a copy of, I don't know what happened to my copy of it. It's from Carson Newman College, but I did it as part of a newspaper project here at UK and it was offered over the wire to newspapers throughout the state. Only a few of them picked it up. The Troublesome Creek Times ran it. It was intended as a herald for this anthology, which was supposed to come out that spring, it's been in of danger of being published.

Green: I think I have seen this, actually, it was in with the anthology backed material at the Appalachian Archives.

Lyon: About the anthology. It was kind of an announcement of that. I said some things there that I still haven't found a better way to say about the importance of regional writing, of a respect for that. It really gets me that New York doesn't see itself as a region, New York sees itself as the world, but we're a region, you know.

Green: Periphery.

Lyon: It shows who's got the power..

Green: A colony.

Lyon: The center as opposed to a periphery and it's part of a long sequence.

Green: Everything in our society feeds it to us, even if you go to Kroger. I have a theory of rice crispiness, that no matter where you go in the United States you can buy Rice Crispies and that it's that homogenization that has a tendency to rule rather than the diversity. We always feel guilty about going to the diversity and reassured by going to the homogenization. Though, I have hopes that it's places like the co-op and, and things like the anthology which almost got out are all symptoms of the fight against that trend.

Lyon: Yeah, I think so. And the movement, it's especially strong in Ohio, but in some other states too, towards using whole language in the schools: the whole language criteria, I don't know if you know about that.

Green: No, no I haven't.

Lyon: The center of it is that you don't teach from only text books and in particular from basal readers to teach English; but that you use books that were written to be books, to be literature, books written not as a text books.

1. The article appeared in the Troublesome Creek Times, Feb. 6, 1985, page six, under the title of "Is a Chicago tragedy greater than one on Troublesome Creek?". A copy may also be found in the Appalachian Special Collections, University of Kentucky, under the Appalachian Poetry Project 87M39, Box 5, Folder 15.

Say if you were teaching Appalachian studies and sociology you wouldn't just use a sociology text, you would use Night Comes to the Cumberlands; you would use Barbara Kingolver's book about the copper mines in the southwest. You take primary materials and you can teach history as well as reading that way.

Green: It brings together all of these sort of arbitrary, hacked up disciplines.

Lyon: Right and it doesn't give you that homogenized basal reader that nobody wrote. Nobody wrote that because they had some inner necessity to write it, they wrote it to make it fit certain vocabulary and it has this homogenized feeling. Whereas little kids can read wonderful picture books and you can read stories that are about Native Americans, you can read them stories that deal with black kids complete with black experience, you can read and deal

with Appalachians. You can bring a whole diversity of the culture into the classroom that way. And I think that you can also encourage kids to write their own experience because whole language is real committed to the notion of learning to read and to write as part of the same process that will have the kids writing, even writing their own texts to read; in other words, they all read what the other kids write.

Green: That sounds like a wonderful, wonderful project. How long has this been going on?

Lyon: I don't know because I'm not involved in education in a formal sense and I don't read educational journals and that kind of thing. I've just picked this up as I've gone to conferences and so forth where there were people there who were advocating it and practicing it. So by the time it had gotten to me it must have been going for a good while. But I know that it pretty much has a good hold in Ohio anyway, and I was recently in a conference in North Carolina where that was a large part of the subject there was the whole language approach.

Green: That's something I had to wait until advanced study in college until you hit things like that. Then if you're interested in Greek history, here read this, you just read a Greek historian.

Lyon: What seems like the most obvious way to go, but it just isn't done.