



Kathryn Stripling Byer, North Carolina Poet Laureate

Beginning at the Bottom

"...the bottom of the backwoods..."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, describing my home county in the 1950's

~ Read during opening session of the North Carolina Library Association 57th Biennial Conference

*My small-town backwater library,
behind the bank,
across from the post office,
floats to the surface of right now,*

*daylight drifting through window
shades onto the wooden floor,
golden light, let's call it,
because to say sepia places*

*it into a scrapbook, and this story
still lives inside the folds
of my mind's aging labyrinth,
its infinite pages bound*

*fast in their signatures,
spines named and numbered,
its nooks where I hid myself,
lifting a book to my nostrils,*

*as if I could sniff out
a good story, just like my grandfather's
bird-dogs flushed quail
from the underbrush. Sometimes*

*I heard whispers rise
from a neighboring bookshelf,
a telephone ringing, the bookmobile
laboring home from the backwoods
and always the light bulbs
in every lamp humming like bees
round a sweet pool of soda spilled
onto the pavement.*

*To that hive of bookshelves,
I journey again
and again, letting go of my one life
to enter the stories of others,*

*still hungry for words
and the way they can bring me back
home to my senses,
the way they reach out to the world.*



Left to Right: Kathryn Stripling Byer, Robert Burgin, Phil Barton, Frannie Ashburn