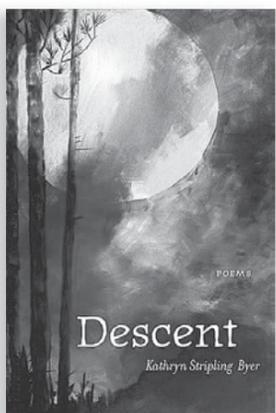


## Book Review: 'Descent'

by Brett Yates

In 2005, Kathryn Stripling Byer, a resident of Cullowhee, NC, became the North Carolina Poet Laureate on the basis of her lyrical accounts of the lives of Appalachian women. Byer was raised, however, not in the mountains but on a farm in Southwest Georgia, and it is her old home to which she is drawn back in her latest book, "Descent: Poems."



voice to praise and mourn and assert truth, and for this reason it takes a little while to realize how deep, varying, and vital Byer's voice really is. Her lines are, by turns, elegiac, feisty, and sardonic; they can be earnestly confessional or darkly ironic, lovingly lyrical or plainly reportorial. Here, her work addresses some of the well-worn aspects of the South's unhappy past, but Byer always

The collection's title suggests both a Dantean journey into the Deep South of an earlier time and a reference to the poet's lineage, with a nod to the complex moral state in which those descended from white Southerners, like Byer, find themselves in the present day. The volume's opening verse describes how the sound of a passing train calls out to the poet's memory: "[I] pretended I could not hear somebody calling / a name I did not want to answer to," though she eventually gives in to "that old rhythm-and-blues beat / I can't stop from singing me home."

Collectively, the poems of "Descent," a slim 57 pages, provide some of the pleasures of a long-form narrative – the book begins with verses about Byer's stoic grandparents before moving on to her old-fashioned father and mother, her gritty childhood, and her conflicted young adulthood. By the end, her father has passed away, and Byer, now nearing "the age when memory falters," has left Georgia for Western North Carolina, where she finds a measure of peace, revisiting home only in her imagination, where "I don't have to stay long. / I can leave when I want to." During this span, Byer covers most of the subjects you'd expect to encounter in a Southern Bildungsroman: church, poverty, racial injustice, sickness, death, Southern cooking.

Byer's stark, declarative free verse contains some of the standard rhythms of contemporary poetry, along with its usual insistence upon the power of the human

interweaves these with her own sharply detailed experiences: when an episode of racist violence occurs in her hometown, she's lingering in front of her bathroom mirror, counting her zits.

Her commitment to veracity can be startling. Asked to explain the reality of the South, she replies, "How should I know? / I stayed inside too much." She takes in the landscape without converting it automatically into "beauty," and she refuses to romanticize her childhood – except once in a while, when she wants to. In bleak summers, she and her cousins filled oil drums with water, pretending they were swimming pools – until the water started to smell, and they dragged themselves out, feeling "silly and shriveled, our skin flecked / with rust, knowing we were still stuck / on the farm. We would always be / hicks. Pink and flabby like pickled / pig flesh in our grandmother's jars."

In this particular poem, it's the pickled pig flesh, of all things, that draws Byer out of her own life to a broader picture of the South. "'Soul food,' I grew up to hear it called / as if the collards and side meat / we set on our table had been sanctified / but by stories we knew were not ours, / in which we were no more than / bystanders, and not always innocent ones."

*Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.*

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