

Feature

"When We Talk About Mountains, We Talk About Memories": a Conversation with Ohio Poet Laureate Kari Gunter-Seymour

—conducted by David Wanczyk,
New Ohio Review editor

David Wanczyk: I'm speaking today with Kari Gunter-Seymour, a 9th generation Appalachian, and the current Poet Laureate of Ohio. Her new anthology, *I Thought I Heard a Cardinal Sing: Ohio's Appalachian Voices*, will be published in March 2022. Kari, welcome. Can you tell us about the project generally and more specifically about your hopes for what it will bring to light about Appalachian poetry?

Kari Gunter-Seymour: I would love to do that, David. My hope is that people will become aware that Ohio is part of Appalachia. Because some people don't know, and a lot of people forget that a quarter of the state of Ohio rests in Appalachia proper, and there are pockets of Appalachian families throughout Ohio, even in major cities throughout Ohio, that still practice those teachings and learnings from their Appalachian heritage. And so this book is all about bringing notice to that.

I think of us as being Central Appalachians. With roots deep in South and North. You know we had those who came up during World War II and the Great Depression to find work. To seek out the steel mills. We have to remember there was lots of coal and iron mining in Ohio early on, too. And so this book is specifically my dream of being able to give these voices an opportunity to sing. Because they're different. We're a little bit different.

We're more of a mixing pot, I think, here in Ohio, because we are, as we're finding out, *Central*. We're not necessarily North; we're not necessarily South, but we're a really good mix of it all.

DW: So you mentioned North and South, and you mentioned the mining, and I think that's an image that folks outside of the region would associate with this part of Appalachia. What are some of the other differences in poetic voice, or in storytelling that you sense about this place that you want to showcase?

KGS: Well, I think that what has happened is we're almost having to defend our Appalachianism. And so we are clinging to those stories, clinging to the old

ways. And we're applying them to modern day. We hold on to the stories that our elders have shared with us—just like any Appalachian does. We have a huge love of the land. Our sense of honor and pride, our love of community and family . . . all these things are hyper-important to us. It's important to us to be involved in the community. It's really important to us to serve.

And so these are the things that I'm trying to give voice to. There's a very strong, robust Appalachian system here, and Southeastern Ohio is the hub of it.

And then we've got Cincinnati where there's a huge pocket of folks down there that are holding on tight to that Appalachian heritage and singing those stories—and I always say "sing," because to me poetry is just like song.

We have contributors in Toledo, we have folks in Dayton. We have a big group in Columbus. And of course down in Marietta. Down in Ironton. And that's how you say it—"ARN-ton." And if you start thinking about it, Ironton is named "Ironton" because of the iron manufacturing that went on there. And when you think about all the lives lost to pulling things out of the ground—that's where we come from and that affects the poetry.

And so this book . . . thank whoever—the gods, whoever anyone believes in. I'm so grateful because the people who have submitted to this book have brought all of that and more. It's really humbling.

DW: That's fantastic. So I'm hearing you talk about service, community, family connection to the land. And those things emerge in the poems of Appalachia. In a serious poem, there's also a conflict about those things and a reflection on the give-and-take of those things. And I wonder if you can talk about that and how the anthology embraces, as you say, a kind of extreme respect for elders and traditions, and the old ways, and also witnesses the pain involved in some of those older ways, or just in life itself in this region. Can you talk about Appalachia itself in poetry as a place that represents many of these positive things you're pointing out, but also as a place where there's some darkness?

KGS: Agreed, so there are very many misconceptions in Appalachia, in general. Because there's this idea that we are undereducated, overfed. That we're lazy, that we don't have teeth. You know, all these images that have come up about Appalachians. And the truth is, that whole misconception about native—I hate to call them "native Appalachians"—but those who lived the land and worked the land and developed the land and *took care of* the land, that misconception comes from Big Coal. When Big Coal came in, they needed a way to discredit Appalachians, and the

way to do that was to make us look like fools. And they did. It was a marvelous campaign.

Well, you know we might have looked a little under-groomed, but that's because we were out working the land, right? We were raising our food, and we were taking care of animals, digging coal and iron. But if they had come to church on Sunday morning or the grange halls on Thursday evening, they would have seen something different.

There's no doubt that when Big Coal pulled out in the Fifties, they left a wasteland. They left people with no homes, no money, no infrastructure, no healthcare, no job training. They literally left an entire generation to die.

But by golly, we didn't die . . . Some did, but mostly we held on. And we've moved forward.

You know, I often say, "so we were overcoming Big Coal, but then immediately we got hit by Big Pharma." And so that's another issue here in Ohio poems and for a long time we were second in the nation of overdose deaths from opioids. But that's changing as well. We are so hard-working as a culture, and because we're hardworking, we had the jobs that are the most dangerous. And we also had the jobs where we were injured the most. And we found out what happened with Big Pharma—so many people were getting hurt in the mine. And when opioids came out as a way to help these folks who were really struggling with black lung, and, you know, just ruined bodies from being bent over in the mine year after year after year. I'm talking a lifetime. We all know what happened.

DW: How did those things come into the poetry? Community, family, hard work, attachment to land—all these great values, which we might suggest are American values, but we also want to recognize that there is a certain quality to them in a certain place. And there's specific pain involved in Appalachia too . . . Obviously an Appalachian poem does not have to be about all of those things, but it often is. And there might be references to coal or to drug use or to other things that have really hindered people in this area, along with some of that light.

KGS: Absolutely. In my own writing I blend those. And I think the reason I do that is that I was taught as a very young child, "Okay, it happened. Now you gotta find a way to get over it." And I think that's another way of life for Appalachians. We're allowed to dwell in the drama for a little bit, but then you can't sit down. The garden won't grow—. I mean, you have to work.

My grandparents were sustaining farmers just outside of Amesville, Ohio. As a kid, I mean we ate so high on the hog because, literally, they raised the hog.

In my own writing, though, I feel like I have to present the problem, and then almost present an answer to it, in the way that I have learned to cope. So it's those coping skills I've been taught or have developed, I let them take over, and bring closure to the poem. I do have poems that speak about addiction. I've done a lot of work in addiction since becoming poet laureate. That's some of the finest work I think I've done this past year and a half. Good, good folks who just made a mistake or have an illness, right?

So, yes, I like to blend both of those worlds. I think we ask the questions, and then we do our best to answer them without feeling sorry for ourselves.

DW: From the outside, people think Appalachian poetry may be encompassing certain images or voices or maybe even brands, and there can be an authenticity that comes from those words. When we look at submissions for NOR in particular, we might say, "that feels real, it feels of *this region*, close to where we are here in Athens." When poets invoke a creek, or a mine, or a certain kind of home or diner or even a cigarette. But of course there are pitfalls in those references, right? So how does an Appalachian poem, and how do you as a writer invoke, certain images in order to tell a well-known and worthwhile story about Appalachia while also challenging some of the misconceptions of the place?

KGS: Personally, I write what I know. I write from my sense of place. I don't try to speak for anybody else. I speak strictly for myself, and so when I use a word . . . like I might say, "I'm fixing to go." There's a comfort. There's a comfort in it. My own grandmother used to say things like, "I'm gonna go down to the *crick* and put my feet in" or "I'm gonna go do the *WAR-sh.*"

I think of Jo—I love Jo Carson. You know, she was writing back in the late Eighties. And she was really one of the women poets who got some great no-tice and some lifting up. And you know, her work is very "dialect." And I do love that, because at that time it was needed. That dialect was needed to bring attention to the area and to Appalachia. And I think now we're challenged to maintain our dialect, but also to show how we have moved forward. In other words, there's that blending of modern and historic, that happy blending.

DW: So are there words that you use in a poem to quickly set a southern Ohio scene? To say, "I'm conversing with this tradition, and I'm writing what I know, and I want readers to be here with me quickly"?

KGS: Golly. You know, that's a good question. I've never really thought of that, David. You know, I'm one of those people that a poem kind of hits me over the head and then I have to sit down and write it. And I guess this is taking the cheap way, but I think because I write so strongly from my sense of place that maybe I'm just lucky that it comes out.

I've really never lived anywhere else, so it's ingrained in me. You know this southeastern Ohio landscape. We don't have mountains, we have hills. We have the foothills. We have growing times of the year. And you know, I've lived both in the city and in the holler. And so I bring all that, and I guess it just comes out of me because I never really thought about my using specific techniques or specific words . . . I just use the words I know.

DW: I want to give our readers a chance to see some more of your work and understand it with you. One of your poems is called "Alone in the House of my Heart." It was published by our friends at *Sheila-Na-Gig* magazine, out of Southern Ohio. It's a poem about a damaged relationship the speaker's son has, but at the end of the speaker looks inward. These stanzas, I think, pertain to what we've been talking about as Appalachian poetry.

On nights I drink too much wine
I blame myself—my A-line skirts,
Weight-Watchers diets, my son
growing up single-mommed
inside small-town America,
lured off course by a spritz
of patchouli, a flash of black lace.

Tonight I weep for all I cannot fix,
wish for a newfangled deity to implore,
a *let's make a deal* beyond altar and incense,
a clearing house for the backlog of Karma.
I drape a makeshift veil over my head,
one hand raised in supplication,
the other shielding my heart.

This poem is what I think I mean by you invoking something that someone from outside of Appalachia would recognize but also changing it. So, you mentioned dieting, for instance. Now that might apply to lots of places, but it feels specific here. Or this word, "single-mommed," using the word as a verb. And

“inside small town America.” But the poem isn’t full of the clichés of small-town America. We have some brokenness, some faith. We have certain specific images and ideas that might evoke Appalachia but don’t fall neatly into a reader’s preconceptions or biases. So, is that a new kind of Appalachian poem?

KGS: I wanna share what I’ve been through, and I hope I’m not whining. What I’m trying to say is, I’ve been through this. I know you have, too. I may be Appalachian, and you may not be. You might be urban L.A., but we have things in common. And one of those is we may have both been single mothers.

One thing I haven’t mentioned about Appalachia is that for generations, there has been a huge belief in the church. I mean, when you’re working for a living off the land and the Lord is in charge of the weather, you’re gonna be a church-goer. And I got a little bit too much church jammed down my throat as a kid.

And so that’s why I struggle with the “deity,” and that’s why I make that comparison to “Let’s Make a Deal.”

This is how it is for me here in Appalachia. But I also know that that mother out in L.A. is having a very similar experience. You know, she’s also a single mother. She’s also having issues. She also loves her son and wants the best for him. It’s just a little different for me than it is for her, just because of location. And I don’t know what her spiritual guidance is, but I do know what mine is. And I’m always looking for that light, right? But I have tons of guilt.

And so I was just trying to really put all of that in there . . . It’s almost like a confessional toward the end, and you do have to question these things, and so this poem is for mothers everywhere, not just in Appalachia.

DW: I do love that line “tonight I weep for all I cannot fix.” Which I feel has extra resonance in the context of this place, but I also want to go back to your “wishing for a newfangled deity to implore” considering what you said about religious traditions. This poem is about trust in tradition but also a re-seeing of a tradition, right? And that feels like part of your project as an artist.

KGS: It is.

DW: And to never forget *what was*. But never to be stuck in *what was*. And I think that reading your poems and talking with you helps me understand that many poets from this region feel this. They want to defend the place and be grateful.

And I’m thinking of these last lines: “I drape a makeshift veil over my head / one hand raised in supplication, / the other shielding my heart.” And that feels

like something about Appalachia, too. That there's a begging hope and a pride. This place is *me* and I'm going to keep some of it.

KGS: When you said, 'I wanna keep some of this place,' yes, I do. I want to keep it. But I think it's always niggling in the back of my mind, and I think probably many others who are Appalachian: we feel that someone's going to take it from us. Because they have. Big Coal, Big Pharma. It's happened so many times. In another one of my poems I say "we've rarely been offered a hand that didn't destroy."

DW: That sounds like John Prine, doesn't it?

KGS: It does! Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. I love that. But I think to address what you were asking, I think some Appalachian poems have a little bit of an unbalancing feeling that this could all be taken away. And I for one really see how this could be taken away so easily.

DW: —Just to clarify, what could be taken away?

KGS: Oh. Just our land, our heritage, all of this could be stripped from us. We've been raised on that concept. Be careful. Be wily. Listen. It can be taken from you so easily, like Big Coal did when they came in and started calling us fools and depicting us, as you know, hillbillies, white trash. All of that was branding and marketing, you know? And so your honor can even be stripped so easily, and that's always in the back of our minds.

DW: And that comes into the poems?

KGS: It comes into the poems. And what we're trying to do is make our mark. And again, I shouldn't speak for anyone else, but what I'm trying to do is make a mark in saying, you may have had the wrong impression. You may have not understood. You *might* *should*—I'm going to use a little bit of language there—you might should educate yourself just a little bit into the history of what hap-pened in Appalachia. When all of a sudden there were "hillbillies."

But yeah, call me a "hillbilly"—I'm proud of that. I'm proud of that, 'cause it means I'm a survivor. It means my people can love the land and not exploit the land. We have been exploited. And we're all trying to get over that, you know?

DW: Since you're talking about reevaluating things and revaluing things, I'd like to bring some attention to your poem "Hella Barbie 1968." An incredible

poem about a deal you made with your mother to lose five pounds and then, as a reward, receive the most impossibly figured creature—Barbie. By the end of the poem, though, when the joy of the Barbie has run its course and the speaker seems to be aware that the deal wasn't the healthiest, the poem moves in a direction that I think can help us understand something about Appalachian poetry. Because it defines another kind of voluptuousness. And again, this is a poem from the excellent *Sheila-Na-Gig*. Can you read the last stanza for us?

KGS: Of course.

Come haying season, I lost five pounds
throwing bales good as any of the boys.
My new obsession? To insist
ordinary things be somehow more—
a brittle leaf laced in snow,
the sugary smell of clover-filled pastures,
my mother's voice, twanged and weedy,
calling *don't be late for supper!*

DW: Thank you! So the irony there is the mother of the speaker had been encouraging weight loss, and then expresses love through food. But I want to talk about that line, "My new obsession? To insist / ordinary things be somehow more." Which in the specific poem is connected to weight but then, more widely, reminds me of Wordsworth's idea of seeing into the life of things. And as you're talking about reevaluating Appalachian identity or revaluing things that are associated with Central Appalachia, I'm wondering if that insistence on looking at ordinary things is a kind of *ars poetica*!

KGS: I think the way I mean it, anyway, is as you say, observation. We are called upon to be more observant and that gets back to everything about having a successful farm—you know my grandparents planted and harvested by the signs. They knew. They could tell by where the stars were, the time of year it was, what was happening with the breezes. Just what was happening with the temperature in the ground. My grandmother put her hands in the ground and had a good idea of what she should be doing. And so it's about observation.

And that's what I'm thinking about. Instead of your obsession being about own-ing this glamour doll or controlling your body. You start realizing what the true value of life is. And that's what I was getting at. What's truly valuable? Are all these manmade things truly valuable? Or is it really about who we are and who we love

and those things around us that I am so grateful for here in southeastern Ohio.

But I'm just saying that I guess you come to a certain place in your life, where you start to get the big picture. And that it's more than just about you, and that by observing and by making it be about a whole lot more than you, you're giving so much back.

DW: Kari, that is so positive! Is that poem not, like, really complicated at the end, though?

KGS: [Laughs] It is.

DW: When you say, “insist ordinary things be somehow more” . . . I love that because it’s . . . Well, what if they’re *not* more and the insisting has a little bit of pain in it? The last place that the poem ends up is “my mother’s voice,” and since the mom has been this complicated figure in the poem, it’s really interesting when you’re saying “I want to insist that ordinary things be more.” It’s like this great celebration, while at the same time saying . . . It’s saying to the newfangled deity, “what else can we get out of this? Is there something missing in my life?” right? That’s how I feel at the end of that.

KGS: Or it’s just saying get over yourself. Like I said earlier on, we’ve been taught: you’ve got to get up. You’ve got to get up and milk the cows. Turns out that you can throw bales as good as the boys. How cool is that? And you try to find the goodness. You know, you try to find the goodness somewhere. And like so many, if I can’t find it anywhere else, I can always find it in nature.

DW: “Insist ordinary things be more.” You’re saying “Get up and milk the cows.” But it’s also “Make art,” right?

KGS: Yes. Oh, absolutely. Yes, I have that luxury. I have the luxury to make poems. I don’t have to milk the cows. But my people, my ancestors did all of that. They got on the boat, nine generations ago in Berkshire, England, and landed in Virginia.

DW: How far back in time do you feel the songs coming from?

KGS: Well, I have . . . I’ve done this research on my own, but I do know that my great, great, great, great grandparents helped settle Aiken, South Carolina. And there was a newsletter when they were celebrating the 150th anniversary

of the founding of Aiken, and they wrote about my grandparents. And what they did say about my grandmother was that she was a gray-haired woman, she was driving a Conestoga wagon, smoking a corncob pipe—and chewing tobacco, both.

They talked about her bonnet, being a milliner's bonnet, and that her shoes were big and rough. But the part I loved the best is they said she'd looked mean enough to tackle a den of wildcats. And I thought, that's where I get it. That's surely where I get it.

DW: Speaking of your people and our people, we've published many poets from Appalachia in NOR. And we're always looking to know more about the past and to hear new voices. So what poets would you want an Appalachian Literature class to cover, and who are some poets that you think might be up-and-coming and could fit into that class as well?

KGS: You know, if I was teaching of course, I'd go right to James Wright. That's without saying. I mean, *he* is an Ohio poet. Diane Gilliam, *Kettle Bottom*—one of my very favorite books. And talk about dialect. Expert at dialect. That book is just, I can't say enough good about it. Just a wonderful book. James Still. I mean, you know he's kind of known for his prose, his *River of Earth*, but his very first book was poems, *Hounds on the Mountain*. And his very last was a collection of poems, *From the Mountains From the Valley*. I mentioned Jo Carson; she was so instrumental. We have Wendell Barry, bell hooks, Ron Rash, Gurney Norman.

I'm thinking of Maggie Anderson. We claim Nikky Finney and Nikki Giovanni, of course. Maurice Manning is another, just stunning. Jim Wayne Miller . . . Frank X Walker. Rebecca Gayle Howell, another just amazing poet. And Nickole Brown is a favorite of mine. She's just a lovely, lovely human being.

And then when I think about up-and-coming . . . Or maybe I could just give you a little preview into *I Thought I Heard a Cardinal Sing*. Some of the outstanding voices are Roy Bentley, Paulette Hansel, Richard Hague, Bonnie Proudfoot.

We have Affrilachian, we have LGBTQ, we have those with developmental differences. We have those in recovery. And so I'm excited for people to read it. I think they're gonna be pleasantly and wonderfully surprised. And there is some mention of mountains, but mostly not, because we're Ohio, and we have foothills, right? So when we talk about mountains, we talk about memories, right? But mostly, there are poems that tell stories, and when you get to the heart of things, Appalachians are storytellers. That's how we kept our history for the

very longest time. We're trying to keep those stories alive and make sure people remember how important they are.

DW: I want to ask how writing about Appalachian Ohio has helped you see the place differently. Are you observing and reflecting back on those stories when you're writing poems? Or are you part of a project of reimagining the place itself?

KGS: I want people to have the best image that they can of what is happening in Appalachia today.

You know I mentioned earlier about Big Coal pulling out and leaving a generation of people pretty much to starve to death. And still there was a rising up, right? People survived. They managed. And that's because as a culture, as a community, we all dug in and helped each other.

Reimagine? I don't know that that's the word I'm looking for. I just want readers to have a very clear view of the many sides of Appalachia, and there are people, and I won't mention names, that have written one story. About how he put on his boots and got himself out of Appalachia. By his bootstraps. Okay, well that was one story. There are many, many, many stories. And that whole bootstraps mythology is exactly that. It's just a myth.

So I like to think of my writing as giving back and contributing to the greater good of seeing Appalachia as it really is. I'm trying to say: we're different in the sense that our culture is different. We've been raised certain ways, but we're not unlike the rest of the country, either. You know, we have our issues, and we have our poor, and we have our extremely talented. And in a lot of cases they're the same people.

David Wanczyk: How do you provide that whole story in a poem? Just by witnessing?

Kari Gunter-Seymour: That's exactly how I do it. I write about something I've observed, or something I've experienced myself, or been told. So I definitely observed addiction. So I've written poems about addiction. Okay? And when I write a poem about addiction, I talk about addiction and how deep and troubling and horrible it is, but I also talk about how a community comes together and works toward resolving the issue in the best way they know how. You support the person you love. You get them back into an environment that is filled with love and good food and spiritualism and the land. And all these things I'm talking about, both personally and in the poems, it's remembering the "old ways" even though we're in the new ¹⁸⁸ days.