

CONVERSATION BETWEEN KARI-GUNTER SEYMOUR AND TIMOTHY  
GREEN

*March 15, 2021*  
*via Skype*

**GREEN:** First of all, thanks so much for the inspiration to do this issue, because it was reading your book made me want to feature Appalachian poets. And it was such a fun issue to do, with great poems and storytelling. Do you want to start out just by talking about Appalachia and what it means to you?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Well I hardly know what to say to that, Tim, except I am so happy to have Appalachia lifted up in such a welcome and positive way. I want to go on the record right up front to say that I can only speak from my own personal experiences. I have no authority to speak for others as we, all of us, here in Appalachia and elsewhere, have our own stories to tell. I do want to share that I am proud to say I am Appalachian and that I come from a long line of self-sufficient, resourceful, hardworking people. As far as poetry is concerned, my work is Appalachian through and through. My story began to evolve as I grew tired of submitting my poetry and fine art photography for publication and getting rejections, with comments attached that didn't make sense to me, but I now realize the fact that I was even getting comments at all was a good thing, because most of y'all don't have time to make comments. But a lot of editors and curators were telling me I was trying to be too ethnic, too colorful, comments that spoke to my work being too different and somehow not appropriate. And I thought, "This is who I am, so how can how can that be?" It made me start thinking about who I really was. Growing up near my grandparents' farm in the very small village of Amesville, Ohio, I was sheltered. We all had a bit of twang in our voice; we were all kinds of colors and shapes; and we didn't care because we all grew up together.

The other thing I might mention is that I am an Ohio Appalachian. First of all, a lot of people don't even know that about a quarter of Ohio is in Appalachia proper, and that there are pockets of Appalachians throughout Ohio, those who out-migrated north to find work just before, during, and after World War II. Southern Appalachians don't really recognize me all that much as being Appalachian. And since I'm in Central Appalachia, for some reason Northern Appalachians aren't real fond of recognizing Ohio Appalachians either—I and many other Ohio Appalachians are kind of in this little space of our own here.

Anyway, I'd been attending a lot of workshops and readings, trying to find myself and find my voice and find a place for my photography. I created the Women of Appalachia Project ([www.womenofappalachia.com](http://www.womenofappalachia.com)) for that very reason, because I thought, "If people are not going to be willing to

publish or exhibit my work, I'm in communications marketing and I know how to do this. I can have an art show, and I can hold a poetry reading." So I contacted the Multicultural Center at Ohio University and made my pitch that rural women—Appalachians are a minoritized culture, and they agreed, and lo and behold, within the year I'd been given space to set up an exhibit and a poetry reading. The first year there were five women that I chose from Athens County to exhibit their art, and four of us who were poets gave a poetry reading in honor of Women's History Month.

So roll forward, here we are 12 years later, and the Women of Appalachia Project is a non-profit 501(c)3 and holds trademark rights to the name. Hundreds of women have participated from throughout nearly every Appalachian state as well as out-migraters. WOAP has a juried anthology series, "Women Speak" that I put together every year, published by Sheila-Na-Gig Editions and we travel throughout OH, WV and KY reading our work. WOAP just started a new partnership with the Dairy Barn Arts Center here in Athens County, which is the premier arts center in southeastern Ohio, and they are now exhibiting the fine art.

So that was one direction I took to carve a space for myself artistically and it subsequently created opportunity for others as well. Another direction was to sign up—after trying many different workshop opportunities—for the Hindman Settlement School's week-long writer's workshop, and that's when I found my people. That's when I knew: "Okay, I'm Appalachian. Oh my gosh, that's what it is! I'm Appalachian!" [laughs]

**GREEN:** Are you saying you didn't think of yourself as Appalachian until being in the arts community?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I guess I didn't realize it was a *thing*, you know what I mean? To give you some more background: I finished high school, decided I didn't want to go to college right away, ended up meeting a man, marrying him; he happened to be a coal miner. I mean, this is so classic—married to a coal miner. [both laugh] We bought a house in the bowels of Meigs County, Ohio. Many years later, the marriage didn't work out. I stumbled out of that holler with a three-year-old son and landed in Athens, Ohio, home of Ohio University. At that time I was weaving baskets. That was my art. I have one here to show you.

**GREEN:** Oh, wow! That's beautiful.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Yeah, I'm a classically trained traditional basket weaver. I was making three, four, five baskets a day, weaving them, and I couldn't get ahead, couldn't really make enough money, and it became obvious that I needed to get into the university. Luckily, I did, with the help of a lot of fine people. I was non-traditional, obviously. I was a single mom; my fellow students were in their twenties, if that much, and they were

wonderful. I got into graphic design as a major. I just found my way there. It was an elite group. We had to go through a jury process every year, and my senior year only 20 of us made the cut.

That year I had to bring my son to school with me a lot because I had so much work to do. None of us had home computers then, and everything had to be done in the computer lab. On snow days, my fellow students would watch my son for me while I went to my other classes. It was such an amazing experience, and my professors were fabulous, and I was just so lucky. Then I graduated and went out into the real world, and that's when the rude awakening happened, of course, because I was made fun of for my twang. For a long time, I worked really hard to talk so that I had no twang, and then I realized I can't do that anymore, I just can't. Some of us say, "We worked really hard to get rid of our twang, and now we're working really hard to get it back." [both laugh]

I ended up at the Hindman Settlement School one summer with others who were having similar experiences, just kind of stumbling around this idea of being Appalachian, and what did that mean? Hindman allows us to celebrate that we are Appalachian no matter where we're from, and taught us to just to go ahead and tell our stories—no matter how bizarre or intimate—if we are comfortable sharing them, and that we should take great pride in sharing them because our ancestors worked so hard to get us here. When I think back—I've got a little cheat sheet here—1375 is my earliest ancestor I can trace.

**GREEN:** Oh, wow.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Now, they were not in Appalachia; my people didn't come to Appalachia until the turn of the 1700s. But the Gunter family kept immaculate records. Nine generations ago, John Gunter III and his wife Joanna got on a ship and headed for America. Oh my God, if you've ever watched any movies about that, it's horrid. I mean, just the voyage alone. You may not make it; there was no guarantee. They ended up in Henrico, Virginia, which was thick with coal mining and the iron industry at that time. It's not clear to me if John was a coal miner, I suspect so, but I do know by a few generations later my family was relying on farming as their way of making a living.

The descendants of John and Joanna, my father's people, went on to live in first NC then made their way down into Wagener SC, previously known as Pinder Town and later as Gunter's Crossroads, or Guntersville, after the large number of North Carolinian settlers named Gunter who came to settle there.

My great, great, great, great grandparents, Balaam Gunter and his wife Patience, left Guntersville SC because they heard about the opportunity to make a new settlement meant to be called Aiken SC, because the

Guntersville area was getting too crowded for them. They were tobacco farmers.

When Aiken was celebrating the 150th anniversary of its founding, an old newspaper was unearthed and this information was included in the celebration newsletter about my great, great, great, great grandmother Patience, originally written shortly after her and my grandfather's arrival in the Aiken area:

“She was a strong woman, stubborn, who drove one of the Conestoga wagons. She was chewing tobacco and smoking a corn cob pipe, her shoes were big, loose and rough, and she wore on her head that milliner's creation you call a poke bonnet. In spite of her gray hair she looked brave enough to tackle a den of wild cats.” That's from “Historical Sketches on Aiken, The Way Our People Lived.”

When I think about that, a gray-haired woman who drove a Conestoga wagon. Those wagons were known to hold up to 6 ton, drawn by 4 to 8 horses, mules or oxen that need to be held in reign day after day. She set off to a place that wasn't even a place yet – helped make it into a place, with sweat and determination. Both she and Joanna were badass!

We are, all of us, growers, farmers at heart, including my son. My son has an amazing green thumb. He can grow anything, he just talks it into growing is what he does. [laughs] I remind him he comes from a long line of folk who took up the land and did amazing things.

My maternal grandfather and step-grandmother were very successful sustaining farmers, and I got to grow up alongside them. Was that ever a wonderful supplement to my childhood, because my father was a World War II vet, and he saw a lot of combat, and my mother was bipolar, so it was a challenge growing up in that house. To have my grandparents was just such a blessing, and all the animals and the chores and the garden, and kneeling beside my grandmother and my mama in the garden learning how to plant, and cultivate, how to harvest properly, and what to do to the soil to keep it ripe and good for planting. I was so lucky.

Hindman told me that other people might want to hear those stories, and I was amazed to know that I didn't have to write poems about walking down the lane and discovering the gold leaf and the reflection in the puddle. [both laugh] I don't know if I've just danced clear around anything you actually asked me, but ...

**GREEN:** No, it's great. One thing that I love about doing these issues is that we get to see the common threads that run through the poems. One vein in this issue seems to be pride in family heritage, and the desire to save it through storytelling. Then the issue with the stereotypes of Appalachia comes in, and a lot of people have mentioned how their accents are perceived when they leave, and how that makes them feel. It made me think about how if you really want to damage somebody emotionally, making fun of something that they have pride in is the worst thing you can do. If you're

proud of something and then it's criticized, that's a real wound, and that shows through in a lot of what people have been talking about and writing about.

When we talked last summer, you explained the history of that stereotype was tied to the coal mining industry. Do you want to explain that again? It was fascinating. I didn't know that's where it came from.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Sure. You have to remember that coal mining turned out to be a very, very, very lucrative way of earning money for the coal companies. And they were ruthless. They'd sink a shaft or pit anywhere they could find a place to sink it. They'd make people live in company housing with very low wages and make them spend their money at the company store, so it was very nearly indentured slavery, really, for the coal miners and their families. It was extremely hard dangerous work My God, those folks worked so hard for so little. And let me also mention surface and mountaintop removal, and the only good thing that has come from that is it brought attention to itself. All that scalping of the land is making people, and so, too, our legislators, wake up and be aware of how horrible coal mining has been to the land.

The whole concept of coming up with the hillbilly, the hick, the white trash, redneck, no-teeth, barefoot was to humiliate and make fun of Appalachians so the coal companies could come in and take over, because it was a lot easier for the coal companies to say, "Look, we're trying to help these people, these overfed, undergroomed, undereducated people. Not much to be done for them—look at 'em—but we're trying to help. We're trying to bring jobs to their area." Well, that was really not the case. It was not about helping Appalachians, but about lining their pockets.

In the 1950s, coal went into steady decline as natural gas, oil-burning and nuclear-powered generating plants became more common. Jobs dried up and companies pulled out, some literally overnight, left any machinery behind they didn't want, left the land a mess. Coal companies didn't reclaim any of the land until they were forced to do so many years later. So, there we were with bands and bands of Appalachians with no jobs, no income, no way to farm the land, as topsoil had been tainted and water sources ruined with acid run-off—for many, no homes, because they had lived in company housing, and they were not allowed to do that anymore because the houses were still owned by the coal companies; those places were rented out to people who had money.

Around that time, people like Shelby Adams and John Dominis came in with their cameras and took photographs of the people living in such extreme poverty, and they are heartbreaking. And these are the photographs, unfortunately, that have stood the test of time. When people think of Appalachia, they think of those photographs, when Big Coal nearly killed an entire generation just because they were selfish, horrible, greedy people, who cared nothing for their employees or the land. That's the visual that

sticks with Appalachia, that time in which so many people were deeply impoverished and struggling to live.

So the government became aware of this due in great part to those photographs. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson declared the “War on Poverty.” “We’re going to save these people.” Well, what they did was provide food funding, a little bit of help with housing, as in pulling in a few manufactured homes for people to live in, but there were no job opportunities, no education or retraining, minimal healthcare. All the government did was keep these good folks alive; they didn’t give them any hope or allow them to have pride in themselves. I get fired up when I talk about it. There were deaths to be sure, but many survived in spite of every hardship thrown at them. Can you even imagine?

**GREEN:** I wonder how much of it is a preview of what the rest of the world is going to go through, with automation and A.I. and self-driving trucks taking away jobs. And then there’s the idea that of universal basic income is going to solve it, sending everybody a check so they can afford food, as if a sense of purpose isn’t just as important. We get meaning out of doing something productive. When that’s taken away, even if you still have sustenance, you still have to figure out what you’re going to do with your life. So, in a lot of regions, there’s the problems with despair leading to drug addiction.

I’m from Rochester, New York, where it’s a similar story on a smaller scale. Almost half of the city’s population worked at Kodak, and then Kodak just moved all their plants out, and it’s one of the poorest cities in the country. We’re all going to be struggling with no matter where we are, because this is coming. So how is Appalachia dealing with it decades later—is there a corner that’s being turned?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I think people that moved into and settled in Appalachia, like my folks nine generations ago, were scrappers, every one. I mean, think of the coal miners, think of the people who moved into the mountains. My God, sometimes they couldn’t get out the whole winter long, and sometimes they couldn’t get out in the spring either because of the water. So they were hearty people. We are a hearty people. We know what we’re up against. And we believe in family and honor and many of us believe in God or some sort of religion or spirituality, we love the land. And again I’ll say family—sometimes our family isn’t just our blood family, but it’s community, and we stick together. The Amish do the same thing, when someone’s barn burns down within the month everybody’s over there rebuilding that barn. That’s still happening even today in Appalachia. We may not be building barns but we’re building each other up.

I would like to say, too, that I’m glad you brought that up about Rochester, New York, because to me Appalachia is equated with poverty because of that long ago story, because of those photographs, and more coal

mines closing and also the opioid epidemic. Greedy, horrible Big Pharma brought so many opioids into Appalachia, into West Virginia especially, that they *have* lost a generation of people in that beautiful state, and there are children growing up without parents because of Big Pharma, and again, it's just greediness. Poverty is a national embarrassment, a national tragedy, not an Appalachian one. Until we level the playing field in education so that everybody gets equal education; everybody gets equal health care; everybody gets equal attention to their mental health; housing; those basic needs that every person must have to be able to survive and to thrive, we will never come to harmony as a nation.

I cannot understand why the incredibly wealthy don't want to help with that. How much money do you need to be happy? And it seems like they're not all that happy, anyway, whereas I am not rich in cash, but I am so rich in my family, my ancestors, my friends like you and my dear local pocket of poetry friends, my colleagues. I'm so rich that I can hardly stand myself, and I don't need much money for that. I need *some* money; I needed education, and I got educated. I was so lucky. I have health care. I have a wonderful place to live and be warm. When I needed attention to my mental health, I was able to get that, and I was so lucky in that. When I think about other people who complain about their ties to Appalachia or having been raised in Appalachia, I scratch my head. They are allowed to tell that story, of course, but I can't help but wonder if they didn't get any communal support, if there was just no way, because they lived in such deep pockets of poverty or were so extremely looked down upon. That makes me so sad, and takes me back to just exactly what you're saying. I think you're right; I think our country is headed that direction, everyone struggling, if we don't wise up.

**GREEN:** One thing that your story about the coal mining industry pushing the stereotypes reminded me of: Have you ever, by any chance, read the pamphlet from John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board, "The Country School of Tomorrow"? It's from 1913, and became the blueprint for the public school system. At one point it describes how the "molding hand" of modern schooling will transform the "rural folk":

We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning, or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, editors, poets or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians nor lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have an ample supply ... The task we set before ourselves is very simple as well as a very beautiful one, to train these people as we find them to a perfectly ideal life just where they are ...

No scholars or artists, we have plenty of those! You have a great poem in your most recent book, where Mike Bloomberg is quoted: "I could teach

anybody to be a farmer. You dig a hole, put a seed in, put dirt on top, add water.” I think that’s the mentality, that we need this class of people that we can exploit.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Yeah, it reminds me of that movie *The Hunger Games*. I see that happening around me and I’m worried for our children and grandchildren, because I really do think there’s such a disproportionate division of money and racial inequality, disrespect for the working class. It’s shameful. It’s really shameful.

**GREEN:** There’s a sense in the poems and note in this issue that looking back is trying to save the past. Is there a sense that the regular people of Appalachia—I know the artists are trying to save the culture and the history—but is that also a general theme among people?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Again, Tim, I think I can only speak for myself and those I know, those who are in my little world, and we certainly are. I pass down stories to my son, old and new, and he to his daughter. My grandson is only three, but we’re going to try to get him in the garden this summer and tell him our stories, acquaint him with the soil. My husband, like so many Appalachians, can fix just about anything, skills passed down from his father and further groomed over time.

Unfortunately, my mama’s generation, my daddy’s, didn’t want to farm, because they’d been through the war and displaced. My mama’s people—she and her sisters—ended up in Warren, Ohio, to work in the factories. My grandmother did what few women of that time ever did and divorced her husband, my grandfather. And they went north. The three oldest daughters went first, and earned enough to get a small place, and brought my grandmother and my mother up. My mother was only sixteen. My daddy’s father died when he was eleven. At the start of the war, his mother signed him up to fight so they would have a steady paycheck, and moved his sisters and a brother from Monterey, TN to the exact same neighborhood in Warren. My parents met just after the war and married, then decided to make their home near my mama’s people in southeastern Ohio.

So the farming just kind of went off in my parent’s generation; none of them farmed. Although, my Aunt Laura is—*was*; she just passed last week at 96—an amazing gardener, and all her life put up all her food. Her cellar shelves would be the most beautiful, colorful thing and always reminded me of my grandmother’s, and my own, as a young woman, because that was so important to me. I took such pride in all those beautiful jars of preserved foods for the winters, because I knew it was wholesome, tasted better, was raised pesticide free and handy in case you might not be able to get out much through the winter. When my mom was a child, they couldn’t just up and go to the grocery store. They had to have enough food for the entire family to last through to the next planting and harvest, so we’re not talking about a



few months; we're talking like eight months. My mama often talked about being so sick of soup beans, because it came down to cornbread and soup beans and wilted apples that were in the root cellar, and some potatoes, but they'd be awful pithy by the last few that they'd eat.

Those kinds of stories of perseverance and remaining strong and having the will to go on and taking pride in it—those are the stories that make us who we are. I think that's what makes me Appalachian. Those stories being told from one generation to the next are like gold. Those are things that I want to hold onto, don't ever want to forget.

**GREEN:** One of the poems is about your grandmother, I think, who was a pack horse librarian during the New Deal era. Do you want to tell what that was?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Okay, full disclosure. I didn't have people in Kentucky, but I did hear that story. It was a story that was shared with me, and I felt compelled to write it down— to lift up those incredible women. Kentucky was, as I say in the poem, a sundered area. Before the '50s, there were few roads; the roads that existed were the ones that were foraged by the people that were brave enough to go up in those mountains and live. So mountain folk were self-sufficient, and depended on horseback and mule. There weren't a whole lot of covered wagons going up into the mountains because in many places there was not even a wide enough path to put one on. They had to eventually blow that rock to make roadways, blow down or through the mountains.

So meanwhile, during that time, which was 1934-35, one of the New Deal projects sponsored by the WPA was to pay women to ride their horses or mules into the mountains to bring education by way of books. And they did, these young women, heroes, every one. Can you imagine setting off into the mountains on your own, a week or two at a time, having to sleep out under the sky? And they were brave enough to set off like that because, number one, the adventure, and, number two, they felt so strongly about bringing education to the mountains. I do, however, describe my actual step-grandmother, Fanny, in that poem. She did indeed have “flaming red hair, a brand of sass all her own.”

One of the most beautiful things—which I didn't find a way to put into the poem because it just wouldn't fit itself in there for me—was that the mountain women, after receiving and sharing these WPA books, started making their own books. They would carve the covers out of thin pieces of wood, and inside they'd use feedsack cloth and they would write on the cloth, share recipes, poems or family stories. So they started sending back these books they made with the pack horse librarians, and those books were put into circulation throughout the mountains and around Appalachia, so that others could read that work as well. A few of those handmade books have survived.

None of that would have happened without somebody at the WPA, which we all know was just a marvelous thing. We have all that beautiful photography from that time. So much of what we know about that era is because the WPA put money into helping employ people, and a good bit went into the arts. That's a perfect example of how we must have the arts. That's really our history. Our history is art history; it tells the true story. The media can write down anything it wants, but if you look at the art, you'll know the true story.

**GREEN:** The pack horse librarians seem to embody everything that we've been talking about. One thing I learned in putting this issue together—I looked up the etymology of *Appalachia*. It comes from an indigenous group near Tallahassee, Florida, and it means “the place on the other side of the river,” almost like the place where it's harder to live.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I love that!

**GREEN:** It's like the personality has been embodied in the word for however many hundreds of years.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** That leads me into something I wanted to be sure and say today: One thing I regret about the stories coming out of Appalachia is that we are not hearing enough from our Indigenous, Black, Asian-American, LGBTQ and those with developmental differences. I want to go on record for being a champion for change, and I hope to do whatever I can to lift up those voices that have gone for way too long without being heard. I hope someone will engage me in some way as Ohio Poet Laureate to do even more work with this, because the stories are so fascinating, and they are the same yet different, if you can even imagine that—because of course you can, the difference it would be to be a Black Appalachian—or what we call Affrilachian—or Indigenous Appalachian, or Asian American Appalachian, or LGBTQ, or in some way challenged, but to also have that stigma of Appalachia on top of that. My “Spoken & Heard” seasonal performance series works to address this issue, by featuring these voices.

**GREEN:** Yeah, definitely. And another fascinating thing about the Affrilachian movement is that Appalachian used to be defined even by the census as the “white hill people” of this region, completely erasing other groups. And it was actually the Affrilachian poets, and Frank X Walker, who made that a movement and got that changed and added that to the dictionary.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Yes! I would like to say, too, that Frank X Walker does not get nearly enough appreciation for the work he has done and continues to do; it's just amazing, and Frank is an amazing poet, and an amazing reader. If you get a chance to hear him, go! Other relevant voices

coming out of Appalachia are Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, Carter Sickles, Crystal Wilkinson, Savannah Sipple and Michael Croley, just to name a few.

**GREEN:** Let's talk a little bit about how you came into poetry yourself, because you came later when your son was deployed in Iraq. Do you want to explain how you came into writing poetry in the first place?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Sure. As you said, my son deployed. He'd gone to boot camp, finished boot camp. I went down to visit him in Georgia at Fort Benning and I got to spend a couple days with him. They were immediately shipped out to Korea for a year. He got to come home for 30 days and then immediately deployed to Iraq. So he was basically out of the country for two and a half years as a 19-20-21-year-old. And a year and a half of that was just absolute hell in Iraq. They saw so much combat. They were in the Fallujah, Ramadi area in 2004. The U.S. military called it some of the heaviest urban combat since the Battle of Huế City in Vietnam in 1968. My son's battalion lost a man or more a week.

**GREEN:** Oh, wow.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** It was just unbarable, and the only way I could keep track of anything was through internet reporting. My son could call me on a landline that had set up there at his FOB in Iraq, but he'd have to wait in line sometimes for hours. And he'd be on mission for a week or two at a time, so I wouldn't hear from him for sometimes a couple of weeks or more. I mean, literally—I still get emotional now when I talk about it—I wouldn't know for days if my child was alive or not. And it was so hard on him to be doing what he was doing. As a parent, when your child calls in the middle of the night—because of the time difference—you're waking up in the middle of the night trying to remain calm and cheerful and trying to give him what he needs, emotionally.

I lost so much weight; I was always in the gym; I was constantly running and lifting, just trying to deal with my anxiety. I started journaling, and then someone—I feel bad not remembering exactly who said it to me—said, “You should try poetry, because it makes you really focus in, and I think that will help you bring some order to your chaos.” And it did it, it really did. And it did even more than that. It was weird; it's almost like it brought me to faith. When I say faith, I don't mean religion. I just mean it made me understand that you can't—I use the word “pray” liberally—pray for someone to save your son, like God, if you don't believe they will. And so I realized, “I have to believe this. I have to believe that this is going to be the outcome, that he is going to survive this and he's going to come home.”

Well, he did. He came home, but he went back again a year later. And then about a year and a half after that deployment, he went again, this time to Afghanistan. After three deployments, we were all just a mess, but I was

still journaling, still writing poetry. I wrote some terrible poetry in the beginning. I may still be, I don't know [laughs], but I feel like it saved me, and that's why I'm such a proponent of poetry as a healing device. I had the opportunity to work with incarcerated teens and adults and women in recovery over the winter in my role as poet laureate, and it was one of the most uplifting and heartwarming and gut-wrenching things I have ever done next to living through this time of my son's deployments, and it humbled me. I truly do believe that poetry heals and writing heals, and I think that is my religion now.

So that's where that all came from, just trying to find my way out of such incredible anxiety and fear, and feeling so lost and needing that faith, realizing that that's what it was I needed, to believe that he was going to come home. And I'm grateful he did and grateful to all the people who helped me along the way, who mentored me and believed in me, and even the people that told me my work sucked [both laugh] because that was important too, to say, "You need to work harder; this is not happening." I've had a lot of wonderful people in my life who've helped me.

**GREEN:** Yeah, that issue of poetry as healing is fascinating to me because I think it's at the heart of what poetry really is, and what art really is, too. And whoever said that to you put it the perfect way, about finding order in chaos. And there's actual studies. James Pennebaker is a psychologist who studies the effect being able to tell your story has on your mental state and your physical health, even looking at your serum levels in your blood after a control group has not told an important story and another group has. And the thing about it, though, is—you were talking about how they weren't good poems early on, right?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** [laughs] They were not well-written poems, but they were great poems. The story was good.

**GREEN:** Exactly, yeah. That's the thing: The idea of style versus substance is really interesting when you think about it in terms of healing, because if the real function of it is to make order out of the chaos, then that's the issue, and not how well the sentences are crafted, or how good your metaphors are. So how does it change as you become more of a writer? I mean, now you're Ohio state poet laureate—

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** —which is just madness! You can go ahead and print that too. [both laugh]

**GREEN:** How did you go about crafting, and did your mindset change at all, or do you try to keep the same mindset? I guess what I'm wondering about is whether you still approach poems the same way, because I feel like you found the heart of poetry right away for that reason. How do you

incorporate more skill as you become a better poet with that without losing it?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Well, I've said this to you before: My poems are kind of given to me. I know that sounds crazy, but a topic will come into my mind, and then over time it just lays itself out. I'll just think and think and think on it, and then I start writing it. I feel like the Muse, whoever that is, takes over in some ways. It's like a freewheeling freewriting exercise. I usually have a beginning and an ending and a little bit of what's happening in the middle, and that's where I need to fill in.

I think, again, of the mentoring I get at Hindman Settlement School from amazing, amazing poets that do the workshops there like Rebecca Gayle Howell, Nickole Brown—these are people that I know you know. You get to spend time with people like Silas House, who is one of the premier southern writers today. Robert Gipe hangs out there; you sit down and have lunch with Robert Gipe, Ron Houchin. I signed up to work with Frank X Walker this summer. You meet these wonderful folks in person, and you read their work. And then there's something that goes on in your brain, something like when you were a kid, and you were studying for a test, and you'd get yourself all worked up, and you were trying to learn, and really the thing you needed to do was get a good night's sleep. That's what I think has happened to me. I think I got around such good writers, and started reading their work, and *hearing* it.

That's the other beautiful thing about Hindman: Every night there's several readings going on that you can go and listen to. I just feel like the luckiest person in the world in that respect, to have heard what I would consider the absolute best writers in Appalachia today. Lee Smith, Wendell Berry, Nikki Giovanni, Wiley Cash, so many others. I've set on the porch swing with some of these good folks, snapped green beans, have taken their pictures. I've heard the twang or not-twang in their voices, seen the expressions on their faces, the pride on their faces, heard the messages they bring. Dorothy Allison stands up, raises a fist and shouts, "Glory!" because she says there's glory in the word. And this is the woman who wrote *Bastard Out of Carolina*, who had a horrible childhood, and you just can't help but grow when you're around folks like that.

Also, I meet weekly with an intimate group of poet friends who are dear to me in every way and we critique each other's work which has been so impactful. I've also learned to concentrate on every single word. I used to write a poem and be so proud of it and send it out, see if it could get published, and luckily some did. Now I hold on to my poems for quite a while and go back and study each word and see if that's really the word I want to use in a particular spot. Again, it's not so much about wanting to get it published, it's just that I really want to have it right. I want each word to speak to where I'm from, my soil, the ground I take so much pride in.

**GREEN:** Did you have any sort of involvement with poetry before you started around that 2004 time?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I had no prior experience. I had written some short stories in school when they were required, and I'd written a couple more in college for my basic English Comp class. And that's another thing that happened, which was really kind of amazing—it's a long story. I was weaving those baskets that I showed you earlier, and I realized that my son and I were going to starve to death if I kept doing that, and I needed to get into college. I got into a very high-end art show in Columbus, Ohio. It was called Winter Fair, and it was the elite show to get into, it still is. And I told myself, "If I make X number of dollars, I'm going to take a class at Ohio University." And I made more than that. And so I did; I enrolled.

I enrolled in a literature class, the instructor was a TA, and she was a single mother, and so immediately she embraced me. I loved the class. I loved reading the stories. We studied women authors and I was so inspired by that, but I also realized that I couldn't make a good living right off the bat as a writer and stay in southeastern Ohio—at least I didn't think I could. Some other folks helped me get enrolled full time and I was approached about doing graphic design. I showed some aptitude. I just off the cuff took an art class—I'd never done that before either. The professor told me, "You've got something here. I want you to meet so-and-so," and that woman's name is Karen Nulf, another mentor of mine, who said, "You're a graphic designer, and if you want to stay here and you want to make money, you need to do this." So that's what I did. I did graphic design and made a living for my son and I, staying here in southeastern Ohio.

**GREEN:** And you're a photographer too, and have had photographs in *The Sun* among many other places. I just love *The Sun*. You said that you have the sense that poetry is channeled through you. When you do photography, do you feel the same, or is it more cerebral as you set it up? I've always wondered that about the art because it's such a technical art.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I started out shooting randomly. Then while I was working on my masters degree in commercial photography, the practice became so technically-focused, it got to be painful to do it, because the expectation was so high—not only from my professors but from myself to myself. After graduation I put photography aside for a bit. And now I'm back to just looking around and going, "Oh, my God" and snapping photos. A lot of my photography is just with the iPhone, especially when I'm doing portraiture. If I'm out and I want to get someone's photo you stick a camera up and people go [flinches] but you stick an iPhone up and they go [poses wildly] [both laugh] They love it. They want to ham it up for an iPhone, but they don't want to ham it up for a traditional camera. I love capturing people with the iPhone, and because of my technical skill in Photoshop and other

software programs, I get gorgeous photos just off the iPhone. But I do have a tiny, high-end Sony that I carry around with me to get those candid shots. I don't even use the eyepiece; I use as if it were an iPhone, but it's much higher resolution. And, again, people react to it differently if you don't have the camera up to your eye.

So it's kind of yes and no to your question. Yeah, there's so much technically involved in just aperture and shutter speed alone. I can always put that to very good use, but most of the time I am not, and I'm just doing what I do with my poetry, just kind of letting it hit me as it hits me. [laughs]

**GREEN:** I'm so interested in the idea that something turned on spiritually because you were in such an emotional state. One of the things that I always think of poetry as, as a kind of prayer to the unknown aspects of the universe. How do you think of it, though? When you say that the writing is coming through you, where do you think it's coming from? Do you have any thoughts about that?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** [laughs] I like to think some of it's from my ancestors, I really do. I like to think that those imprints are inside me. There is some study on that, that we are imprinted through the generations with certain means of survival and ways of thinking, and so I like to think that a lot of mine comes from that direction. And I want my poems to be meaningful. It's hard for me to sit down and write a poem about a flower, and those who do and do it beautifully and well, I admire, but, to me, that's a waste of my time. I just might as well not even try, because I'm not going to find the transcendence in that blossom, because that's not where my head is, I guess.

I think experience is huge in my work. I've lived a pretty long time, and I think that I've had a good deal of experience, good and bad, and have learned a lot, and I put some of that in there. And then some of it just—everyone experiences this, where you're writing along—especially free writing—and all of a sudden stuff starts coming out of you, and you're just like, “Where did that come from? I love it! Keep going!” The minute you become aware of that it stops, so you have to frenzy yourself back into that space where your brain allows your fingers just to go ahead and write that stuff. That's when I think the best stuff comes, and it's powerful. And yeah, where does that come from?

**GREEN:** It's just such a wonderful mystery. And really, every writer that I talk to talks about—some people use different terms—getting to that sort of state where you're in what Elizabeth Bishop called a “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration,” which I love, but it's just this meditative letting-yourself-be-a-conduit, or at least letting the conscious part of your mind be a conduit, for whatever the subconscious or collective conscience or God wants to say.

Another thing I want to talk about is music, because you sing, and you sang beautifully on our podcast. What do you think of the relationship between music and poetry? Do you think of it as something along the same lines, or do you think of them as being as different as photography and poetry would be?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** I guess I never really even thought of that, Tim, because in my family music was important, so it just comes naturally to me, because to me poetry is music; I always find a musicality in words, and people often talk about the musicality of my poetry. Maybe that's what happens when you're raised in the church and Hank Williams is on the radio and record player at your house when you're a kid, and Ernest Tub, Patsy Cline, and then later on Waylon Jennings and Willie for my own young adulthood, and Black Sabbath [laughs] and many others. My mom played piano. My dad taught me to play guitar when I was in sixth grade. Music's always been a natural part of my life.

So there are times when I'm writing a poem and I just realize the music wants to be in here, that it wants to come in, and so it does. I try not to force it, but lots of times I'll write a poem and then at the end of the poem I'll realize that some bit of spiritual music goes with it. For instance, in my book there is a poem written for my mother, "The Place Where Raccoon Creek Meets Brushy Fork," and I realized at the end of that poem that I had to sing, and what I sing is, "In the sweet by and by we shall meet on that beautiful shore," because that's what it is; that's what that poem is all about. I could say the whole poem, but when it comes down to it, the title says it all, that I believe, and we will meet again, and it will be different.

**GREEN:** Well, to kind of close up—you mentioned that your book feels old now. It's a year old [both laugh], so what are you working on now? Do you have any projects going or next books?

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** The book feels old mostly because I have had so many wonderful opportunities to be invited in and read from it, virtually of course, during this time of pandemic. I am so grateful for that. What I've been working on this past year is moving further into activism, by which I mean attempt to educate. I'm not a staunch in-your-face activist. I believe in redemption. I fully believe in rehabilitation, and that people should be forgiven, because that's what I've been taught; I've been taught about Jesus, and regardless of my rebellion of that in some ways, I still believe in the goodness in everyone, I do; I may be gullible, but I do.

So the poems I'm writing now are leaning themselves more boldly toward activism/education, which I think my chapbook "Serving" was doing by candidly writing about what happens to our young people, our children, during their service and once they leave the military, what it feels like to be the mother of a soldier who has had to engage in actual boots on the ground



combat. So with a louder voice, so to speak, I am writing about what I know—the complexities of Appalachia and its amazing potential, the betrayal of the media and moral failings of our political system, specifically as they apply to Appalachia, the myth of the “bootstraps” narrative, the incredible strength of our women— and as we discussed earlier, I want my work to continue to lobby for equality and resources for all, including our teen populations, and all those voices that are currently outside the bucket.

**GREEN:** I’m looking forward to whatever you come out with. Thanks so much for joining me for this conversation, Kari. It’s been a pleasure as much as I thought it would be.

**GUNTER-SEYMOUR:** Oh, thank you, Tim. It has truly been my privilege and honor.