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A Poet Remembered

Reflections on Bennie Lee Sinclair '61, South Carolina's poet laureate from 1986 until her death on May 22.

The last time I saw Bennie Lee Sinclair was on January 7. I met her and her husband, the potter-carpenter-inventor Don Lewis, for lunch at the Pizza House in Travelers Rest. They'd arrived early, so they could maneuver Bennie Lee's wheelchair to a vacant booth before the noon crowd arrived.

While we were eating our salads and sandwiches, we chatted about our gray hair and our more colorful memories. Near the end of the meal, I said I couldn't believe I'd already spent close to a quarter-century in South Carolina. Bennie Lee, who'd lived in the Upstate all her life, smiled and said *she* couldn't believe she was 60 years old. She'd never expected to live so long.

It was a mild, sunny afternoon, the first week of winter term. We drove in separate cars to campus, where Bennie Lee would visit my class: a course in South Carolina poetry that would begin with the work of the state's poet laureate.

I guided her wheelchair from my office to Furman Hall 106. Bennie Lee seemed distracted — the side effects, I suspected, of the immunosuppressant drugs she'd been taking since her kidney transplant in 1993. Her lifelong diabetes had also affected her vision, greatly impairing her ability to read. The students sat in silence. What in the world were they thinking?

After class, they eagerly flocked around her wheelchair. She'd managed to make her physical frailty underscore the strength of

her commitment to her art — even though she'd stumbled through poems that I'd heard her recite so gracefully, on so many other occasions.

The first occasion was in the summer of 1977. My wife, Barbara, and I had just moved from upstate New York to Greenville County. Although we weren't yet in the phone book, Bennie Lee had called to welcome us to South Carolina. She also asked me to represent Furman at an upcoming reading by Carolina women in the (now-vanished) Burgiss Lounge of Watkins Student Center.

Although I felt a bit uneasy about emceeding a program by a group of poets I'd never met, either on paper or in person, I agreed. Bennie Lee was a difficult person to refuse, even by telephone. I'd never heard a voice quite like hers — a blend of Southern courtesy and Appalachian grit. And she probably told me she'd studied with Al Reid, the Furman professor whose death in 1976 had created the faculty position that I would soon be attempting to fill.

I remember being relieved to find Watkins Student Center on that insufferably hot afternoon — I still wasn't very familiar with either South Carolina summers or the Furman campus — but I don't remember anything that I said in my welcoming remarks at the poetry reading. I hope I was polite and reasonably coherent. I'd probably remember if I'd frightened anyone off.

Bennie Lee's own reading struck me as very strange at the time. She carried to the podium the actual magazines in which her poems had been published. It was a formidable stack, rather precariously balanced. In my own experience, poets *never* read from magazines — they read either from individual collections of their own work, or from manuscript copies of poems that hadn't yet appeared in book form.

But I'll say more about those magazines later.

Over the years, Bennie Lee and I kept in touch, visiting each other's classes frequently. (She served occasionally as writer-in-residence at the Greenville Fine Arts Center and as the head teacher for the creative-writing program of the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities.) When our professional paths didn't cross during a particular year, there was always the New Year's Eve party that my wife and I began hosting in 1980. Bennie Lee and Don would drive down from Wildernessee, their mountain home, to visit us in Travelers Rest.

Bennie Lee enjoyed the diversity of people at these gatherings — professors, neighbors, nurses, carpenters, lawyers, schoolteachers, businessmen, artists, writers, musicians. She could have a thoughtful conversation with anyone, always finding some common ground with her companions of the moment. Wherever Bennie Lee was sitting — kitchen, living room, dining room table, or the family room downstairs — friendly, animated conversation would gather around her, as if she were a movable hearth.

On December 31, 1999, Bennie Lee was in good spirits, although she was confined to her wheelchair and couldn't get up the front steps. A small entourage wheeled her around the house to the back porch, which is on ground level. She seemed energized by the company. She spent much of the evening talking about Appalachian culture with John Shelley of Furman's religion department. She stayed late — unusual for her and Don, both early risers — toasting the new millennium at midnight.

A few days after Bennie Lee's death on May 22, Don told us over the telephone that the party was the last social event she'd been able to enjoy.

Bennie Lee had a wry, playful sense of humor and loved to tell stories. One of her favorites was about attending an awards dinner with a Famous Southern Writer. They were seated at the head table, on either side of a microphone that was (unlike the inebriated F.S.W.) fully functional. He leaned over to ask Bennie Lee if she would run away with him. Bennie Lee, aware that the entire room was listening in on their conversation, fluttered her eyelashes and insisted that she was a married woman who couldn't properly abandon her husband and home. At that point, the F.S.W. proclaimed, "Bennie Lee, if you run away with me, I'll make you the girl singer in my bluegrass band!"

The F.S.W. was the late James Dickey. If you'd like to ponder the undeniable yet oblique relationship between life and art, I invite you to read Bennie Lee's delightful "The First Time Ever I Heard You, Honey, As a One-Man Bluegrass Band." Bennie Lee herself called its unnamed speaker Polyester — an alter ego who enjoyed unsolicited overtures from would-be musicians!

Bennie Lee's appointment as South Carolina's poet laureate in 1986 was a fitting tribute to a writer who'd honored her native state with the truth as she saw it as well as with her deepest love. The position gave her a bully pulpit for causes such as arts education, organ-donor programs and land preservation. When my wife began the Poinsett Park Project in 1996, to establish a greenspace north of Furman's campus, Bennie Lee was there at the first public meeting in the Travelers Rest Public Library, to give the invocation.

As a female writer, living in Southern Appalachia, without a permanent academic appointment, Bennie Lee had good reason to feel marginalized within the small yet often comically hierarchical world of contemporary American poetry. She was never bitter, but she demanded the same respect that she herself accorded to

other writers. Now, looking back more than 20 years, I think that the stack of magazines she schlepped to the podium in Burgiss Lounge had the following deep structure: *Don't dismiss me as a "regional" writer! I've earned the right to be taken seriously! Hear me out!*

Bennie Lee had the ability to nudge those around her in the direction of virtue. Once, while walking with me in the woods behind my too-meticulous lawn, she lavishly praised the large pile of brush that I'd made in a clearing. Such thoughtfulness — to provide the local animals in our suburban neighborhood with useful shelter!

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I was planning to burn the pile the next day. I did, however, check for birds and field mice before I struck the first match. And, in later years, I've always tried to gather brush at the end of autumn and leave it in place for the cold winter months.

I've said very little about Bennie Lee's poems. Many of the ones that have lodged in the brush pile of my own mind concern the same qualities — kindness, good stewardship, kinship — that I associate with her person. "The Arrowhead Scholar," "Landmark," "My Appalachian Wildflowers," and "My Father. His Rabbits." have found a shelter in my memory that no match could ever threaten.

In 1994, Bennie Lee spoke at a symposium on South Carolina poetry held at Furman. I have a videotape of her reading, which I'm viewing as I revise this paragraph. Bennie Lee has just recovered from her kidney transplant, enjoying better health than she has in years, radiant with the gift of a new, unexpected extension of her life. She reads her recently completed "The Dying. The Donor. The Phoenix." and "The Endangered." The camera, fixed on a tripod at the back of McEachern Lecture Room, never moves. Then she says her own favorite among her poems is "August Light," and she voices the words softly, distinctly, often glancing up from the page:

Something has shifted almost imperceptibly,
an axis so removed it is only theory.

But through the window when I wake
the light itself seems to slant, and is golden,
not white or so direct as it was yesterday.

Perhaps it is the best moment we have
for readjusting, instructed in every phase
as we are by the light, which daily becomes more oblique
so that the leaves reflect it curiously.

Or it may merely be a dream
that we are here, and everything changed —
even your face as you sleep, the slow light
toward winter turning.

She reads another poem, "Appalachian Black History." She asks how much time she has left. Then she reads "Ivorybill," a poem about a wishful sighting of an extinct bird, and gracefully walks out of the frame. ●

Gilbert Allen, an award-winning poet and short story writer, has taught literature and creative writing at Furman since 1977.