

## Poems “Knife-edged with Grief and Love”

Kathryn Stripling Byer's five published books of poetry have won awards including the Lamont Poetry Selection for *Wildwood Flower*, The Roanoke-Chowan and Brockman Campbell prizes for *Black Shawl*, and the Southern Independent Booksellers Association Award for *Catching Light*. Her new book, *Coming to Rest*, is a re-articulation and a culmination of her distinguished career, which includes her present position as North Carolina Poet Laureate. These poems locate us in both wider and more intimate time frames. The remembered seasons of personal, familial time may be condensed into household objects, such as a jar of scuppernong jelly, which holds and seems to slow the light in passing through. Geological time and the history of earlier human habitation may be encountered in a Western landscape, as when Zion Canyon recalls vast natural processes, Anasazi beliefs, and the Mormon settlers who named this place out of their own religion.

Thus, Byer's vision places humans in their language of sensory perception, within a physical universe realized in an American range of landscapes, amid the human time of love, marriage, child-rearing, as set against the larger time of natural and cultural history. Her work implies a depth and range of context we rarely meet with in contemporary poetry. These womanly poems are widely human, domestic, prophetic, tinged with mortality by the presence of the dead in memory, and knife-edged with grief and love. They are acutely formed, shapely in their sinuous, changing art, and charm away hurt with their beauty.

Her art, lived within the world, is more expansive, elastic, and vivid than that of poets who remain enclosed within their language. Kay Byer's poems bring words newly alive within those distances of nature and time and meaning out of which poetry originally was born. There is a Whitmanian sweep and verve and gusto in these poems, together with a refinement and precision which mark an exact contemporary mastery. The judges feel honored thus to recognize her body of work with the Fellowship of Southern Writers' Hanes Award for Poetry.—James Applewhite

James Applewhite has taught English literature and creative writing at Duke University since 1972. His *Selected Poems* (Duke University Press) was featured on this web site in January, 2006, [click here](#).

A member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, he presented this tribute to Kathryn Byer when she received the Fellowship's Hanes Award for Poetry at its 2007 conference.