

THE MADE THING

SECOND EDITION

An Anthology of Contemporary Southern Poetry

EDITED BY LEON STOKESBURY



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*An Anthology of Contemporary
Southern Poetry*

Edited by Leon Stokesbury

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS PRESS
FAYETTEVILLE 1999

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22 21 20 19 18 5 4 3 2

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

The made thing : an anthology of contemporary Southern poetry / Leon Stokesbury. —2nd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-55728-578-0 (cloth : alk. paper). —ISBN 1-55728-579-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. American poetry—Southern States. 2. American poetry—20th century.

3. Southern States—Poetry. I. Stokesbury, Leon, 1945– .

PS551.M29 1999

811'.54080975—dc21

99-43633

CIP

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION OF THE MADE THING

When the opportunity to prepare a second edition of *The Made Thing* presented itself, I was curious to see if the last fourteen years had brought any noticeable changes to the poetry of the American South. Obviously, the region itself, as well as the country and the world, had seen many changes. This quick new life, full of web sites and e-mail, global villages and two televisions in every home, certainly appears to be in full bloom now. And there are those that claim such a homogenized and plugged-in existence could hardly hope to retain the distinctive, regional flavors that have characterized Southern literature and poetry for so long.

I, too, at both the end and the beginning of a millennium, have felt the admittance of the electronic and the instantaneous into the rooms of my existence. And, at the same time, as with the first edition, I have attempted to resist any preconceived, and thus restrictive, definition of Southern poetry. So it was with some surprise that I have found little difference in the themes and modes of my contemporary Southern poets from those that came before. Indeed, if anything, those themes that have always dominated Southern poetry, the past as history, often personal or even elegiac history, and a profoundly close relationship to the natural world, seem more prevalent today. Why these traditional subjects would appear even more apparent and discernible today than just fourteen years ago, I do not know. This was, however, the clear impression brought to me by my reading, and I have to admit that I was pleased to find it so.

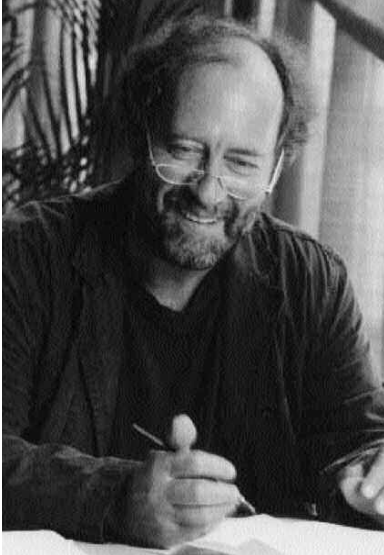
With echoes of Faulkner, the poet Frank Stanford told me once that all art was local, and the mystery was that somehow it was through the local that we come to the universal. If he was right, or if he was telling the truth, mostly, as Huck Finn might say, then the American South still holds a great and unique poetic bounty for readers. Recent years have seen the flowering of such clearly Southern voices as Cathy Smith Bowers, Andrew Hudgins, Rodney Jones, and a host of younger poets just at the beginning of their careers. All are represented here. And when this new work is added to the best of the thirty years before, I believe the reader will discover, as I have, a garland intertwined with many varied and amazing blossoms.

As before, I wish to thank my wife, Susan Thurman, for her help and patience during my constructing of this second edition. I wish also to thank Georgia State University for the granting of a leave-of-absence during which much of the work on this edition of *The Made Thing* was completed.

—Leon Stokesbury
1999

THE MADE THING

SECOND EDITION



RALPH ADAMO

Ralph Adamo was born in New Orleans in 1948. He has taught creative writing and edited *The New Orleans Review* at Loyola University of New Orleans since 1993. His books include two from Lost Roads Publishers, *Sadness at the Private University* and *The End of the World*, and *Hanoi Rose*, published in 1990 by New Orleans Poetry Journal Press. In 1998, he won the first annual Faulkner Society Prize in Poetry.

Photo Credit: Harold Baquet

My Answer

The big impression left on me
By the story of Cain and Abel
Was that meat is better than vegetables.
This is a point raised time
And time again in the Old Testament.

I know how it was.
There was Cain, older, part of the number three,
An important number, and yet forced
To ponder the number four
Most of his life. This drove him crazy.
But not just this. There he was,
Close enough to the well that he could hear
Adam and Eve pattering and rocking in the house.
He turned the field with a scythe
Strapped to his back. He moved his feet
Along slowly while the ground

Opened up behind him. Did he look back ever
To see the worms like so many exposed nerves
Undulating in their chunks of sod? Nah.
But once in a while, oh yes, he did look up
To gaze at the unterraced hills and ponder
The needles and blades of green, but all at one time.
You can bet Adam and Eve leaned on that boy,
Not that they were harsh about it.
Adam was a kind old gentleman
With a well meaning wife.
So what if she'd gotten them into this.
It wasn't the end of the world.
Things needed doing and the field was close to the house.
But Abel, that Abel—sometimes
He wouldn't come back for three days and three nights.
Not that he didn't wish to help out.
You try keeping a bunch of lambs
From getting lost looking for that sweeter taste
Without a dog to help you. Can't be done.
You can't walk away from the other lambs either.
You've got to lead them back and forth
Across the hills while you keep an eye
Peeled for the last one that just got lost.
You develop a sixth sense about which one's missing.
You brood about it. Who's missing?
Then you go off in one direction or another
Trying not to lose the next one.
But it's still a fair time out there.
The hills are full of surprises, not one thing
Quite looks like it did before. Plus,
There are other animals, most of them friendly,
A sackful of corn and onions and potatoes,
And berries to be found among the scrub and heather.
Plus not to have talk all the time.
Especially when your mother feels guilty about something,
And your father acts obscurely embarrassed,
And your brother seems a little bit frenzied.
It's nice to lay way outside at night,
With animals snoring very quietly, and watch
Light pour through the pinholes in the fabric.
Plus, the slaughter won't have to be done for weeks.
So you can relax, even though you can't go to sleep.

By His Appearance in San Diego, Gerald Ford Recalls the Bringing Together of Father and Son

Seeing that nearly blank square of a face from which issue forth flat
subcommon words,
I am reminded of the flare of optimism this flotsam hack once ignited
in the smoke-filled and divided American heart of my father
so bright, if briefly, I got a call,
all the way to the little room in Arkansas where I sat stoned, returning
to the broadcast charades of the
powerful my own unamplified blankness. Was the word 'soul' used, the
phrase 'dark night of'
by this man whose very head appears to be a helmet? Who can remember
but this I know: my father called out of the wide blue of the road
to cheer the shrill broken note of Nixon's passing, to ask me if I thought
it would be better now, be ok, didn't I feel
dissonance lifting, disgust taking a break, at least a hint of a blue sky
aborning?
I held my breath (but maybe only to attenuate the toke) and shook my head.
We can't give up our pessimism now, I said.
And we did not.

—August 1996

Gift of the Guest

Winter of sorrow, you arrive
and take your place at the window.
At first we do not speak.
You stand there looking out, you borrow my clothes freely.
I'm busy with my contract
to smash and cart away statuary
cast during the previous administration.
Time is short and wasting.
There's tons of the other stuff,

its gaudy paint barely dry.
You don't notice how hard I work,
or I wouldn't have to cook supper for both of us.
It's true you never eat, never leave the window
(when I'm around) and do not lift your hands
except to make odd gestures
that ignore the text of my conversation.
It's true you leave me alone.
I don't know why you have come.
The birds do not interest you,
and you don't hear the children when they call up to you
walking home from school.
The trees seem to grow more bare and introspective
at your glance, itself unintentional,
like the many times you shatter the window with your tongue.
You only look at me one time,
and that time my face is thick with plaster.
You speak then, slowly, letting my blue robe fall from your shoulders.
"You have made me laugh very much," you say.
"In return I will leave you this table."
And you go, and by the window is the table I have always had.

Us, Here, Ruled

I don't know if this sort of thing
can happen in other states
but today, on a raised platform
at Ground Zero of Lakeside
Shopping Center it's Queen's Day
when the queens of many things and places
within the state of Louisiana
have gathered to tell the stopped shoppers—
the “ladies and gentlemen” of their
practiced speech—where they are from
and what each of their names is
in a loud voice with a similar ring,
before grouping together under a sea
of crowns to sing “when the saints
go marching in,” an anthem
sort of, for those of us who've
never been anywhere, who just
won't go, who'd rather be subjects
of the Shrimp & Petroleum Festival
Queen, or—really—the tall dark-
haired woman tightly poured in red
whose label, which she alone seems
shy of wearing, proclaims her
Queen of New Orleans, that one,
whom I have not yet begun
to learn how to serve . . .
Or the barefoot Queen of Pines
who just now noticing it's half-price
day at Nine West, busily seeks
respite from regality
in the common quest.

BETTY ADCOCK

Born in rural east Texas in 1938, Betty Adcock is Kenan Writer-in-Residence at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her poetry has won numerous awards, and she is the author of four full collections, including *The Difficult Wheel* in 1995.



Photo Credit: Cathy Mullens

Roller Rink

That summer it just appeared,
like a huge canvas butterfly
pinned to McNaughton's field.
All of us half-grown came every day
to watch and try, in love
with unlikely motion, with ourselves
and the obscure brother
who was older and came from a nameless far end
of the country. He knew, from somewhere,
how to do it, the dance of it turning
faster than music, could bend
and glide smooth as a fish where we fell,
could leap, land and roll on
squatting, backward, one-footed.
We loved him for looking blade-boned and frail,
for being always alone with nothing to tell.
In August the old man who'd taken our change
hefted sections of floor and his tent
and his music into a truckbed and left.
The autumn that came after

rose for us with so perfectly clear
a cry of wild geese and amber light
on its early winds, with so many stars
let loose, and leaves in the rain—
even our shambling, hopeless town
seemed good, just in that turn
before the wheel of the year came down.

Of course it never came again.
But there was the round brown place
where grass wouldn't grow in that field,
but would grow next year with great ghost wheels
of queen anne's lace.
That summer was a line we'd stumbled over,
and so we were free to fall and gather
the dear, unskillful, amazing losses
departure needs. We took them all,
our bodies shooting crazily
into and through each other. And finally past
to army, city, anyplace far.
We took any road out we could take;
but none of us with the sweet-lifting grace
and ease of the promise that farm boy made
who went and stayed.

Walking Out

Fishing alone in a frail boat
he leaned too far, lost hold,
was turned out of the caulked world.
Seventy years he had lived without learning
how surfaces keep the swimmer up.

In that green fall, the churn of fear
slowing to pavane,
one breath held precious and broken,
he counted oar-strokes backward:
shore was not far.
This coin he took from the pocket of terror.

Starting over, over his head,
he reached for the earth.
As creatures of water once called on the future
locked in their bodies, he called on his past.
He walked. Walked. And there was enough
time, just enough, and luck.
Touching greenfingere sand, rising and touching,
body bursting with useless knowledge,
he came at the world from its other direction
and came to his place in air.

Back in his life now, he measures
distances one breath long,
talks less, flexes
the oars of his legs.

Things shimmer where he is,
his house, his earthcolored wife and sons.
Every place raises walls around him
the color of old glass.
Heaven is a high clear skin.

Beneath the drift of flesh his bones remember
trying for bottom.

Twentieth Anniversary

This is the silence known, a place
like the kitchen of an old, high-ceilinged house
where summer's heat has a layering
coolness as if there were woods
or a river close enough by.
When the woman who uses such a place has gone
out of the body of bread dough into her own,
when the man has walked his way to a porch,
and the child has opened the last door,
there is this.
Crumbs swept from the table
glow in a wedge of sun. As in heaven

or the time before birth,
here there is neither eating nor drinking.
The faucet holds one drop imperceptibly
growing, holds precisely the one note
it will let fall.

And whatever singing, forgetting or nightmare
howled in the house between man and woman,
the child laughing or stifling
in a clenched sleep, here
it is summer and cool, the shelves
green with okra, beans, pears in clear jars.

So clear to each other we see clean through,
we've put away whole pieces of the world
that grew in us. We are this late
quiet light that holds all afternoon,
color of those sharp yellow weedflowers
we look for when the trees begin to bare
the rest of things. Even winter
can wear such still shining,
this pair of rings.

Southbound

You can go back in a clap of blue metal
tracked by stewardesses with drinks and virginal masks.
These will work whether you breathe or not. And this
is the first part. The way is farther
into thin roads that sway with the country.
Through the shine of a rented car the red towns rise
and crumble, leaving faces stuck to you like dust.
Following the farms, houses the color of old women,
you gather a cargo from yards full of lapsed
appliances, tin cans, crockery, snapped wheels,
weedy, bottomless chairs. These float through the air
to rest on the sleek hood, the clean seats.
Things broken out of their forms
move to you, their owner, their own.

You slow under weight. The windshield blurs
with the wingbeat of chickens. The hound's
voice takes over your horn.

A green glass vase from a grave in a field
comes flowerless to your hands, holds a smell
of struck matches, of summer on rust, of running
water, of rabbits, of home.

Then the one place flung up like a barrier,
the place where you stop, the last
courthouse and gathering of garrulous stores.

You have brought the town.

It walks in your skin like a visitor.

Here, under the wooden tongue of the church,
by the paths with their toothed gates,
in the light of the drunk as he burns
past hunkered children reaching
for the eyes of their fathers, these fading
and coming like seasons,
you are the tall rooms of your dead.

Merchants still ring small furious bells
and the window of the moviehouse opens,
and the girls who will, open.

Men still stand jack-knifed to trace
deer trails in the dirt.

And blacks scythe the lawns, not singing,
keeping their flag hidden.

You may house again these weathers worn thin
as coins that won't spend, worn smooth
as the years between two who are old
and not fooled any longer. You may stand
beneath the cafe's blue sign where it steps
on the face like a fly. You may bend
to finger the cracked sidewalk,
the shape of stilled lightning, every fork
the same as it was when you thought that map
led to the rim of the world.

You may listen for thunder.



CLAUDIA EMERSON ANDREWS

Claudia Emerson Andrews published her first book, *Pharaoh, Pharaoh*, with Louisiana State University Press in 1997. A former editor of the *Greensboro Review*, she presently teaches English at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Stable

One rusty horseshoe hangs on a nail
above the door, still losing its luck,
and a work-collar swings, an empty
old noose. The silence waits, wild to be
broken by hoofbeat and heavy
harness slap, will founder but remain;
while outside, above the stable,
eight, nine, now ten buzzards swing low
in lazy loops, a loose black warp
of patience, bearing the blank sky
like a pall of wind on mourning
wings. But the bones of this place are
long picked clean. Only the hayrake's
ribs still rise from the rampant grasses.

Plagues

A rain crow lusts in the hot, waxy pines.
Day after day a red-tail thirsts against
the flat sky: the field mice dry and dying,
there is nothing worth leaving the thermals.
Tobacco burns in the fields, and corn
smothers in its silk. The cows, blowsy, slow,
brood in the shallow pond, hooves sunk, sucking
silky mud that rises like blood.

“Smitten,
we are smitten with old plagues.” The great-aunt
waves her hands, her thin forearms sumac-red
with easy bruises.

“Aw, listen to you,”
I humor her, “we are having a drought,
but the almanac—”

“—did not predict these
seventeen-year locusts.” She’s mad now. “‘Pharaoh,
Pharaoh,’ hear them plead?”

I listen, but hear
wordless their persistent rumor. “I don’t know
about that Aunt Kate: I don’t remember
the Bible like you do.”

“I would tear out
your tongue like a bloody root,” she tells me,
“but I am tired,” lays down her head in her
narrow lap. A hymn trembles, rises from
her thighs: *Shall we gather at the river?*

The neighbor cranks the ’49 Ford motor
that runs his irrigation pump, faithless:
the fields shoulder the rank beat of wings, wings
of bitter water. All night the orphaned
locusts wheeze in the darkness, grafted now
with disinherited language, until
we are all of one mind, one swollen tongue:
Pharaoh, Pharaoh, as if there were something
keeping us, as if we could be let go.

Cleaning the Graves

The once a year we come here is as close
as my mother comes to mourning. These graves
are all she has left of land she hated
losing. And I am descended from this
loss: her mother, a woman who trapped
snowbirds for potpie, who let hens nest
in the kitchen in freezing weather
so they would lay better, who could wring their heads
from their bodies in one motion, who could
wrestle down a calf. “Your blood is that cold,”
she tells me, “but you don’t know it yet, never
had hard times. Hard times could never kill one
of us.” The old lie. I know she will always
see her mother in that hated cotton coat,
walking four deep white mules to work.
A figure never diminishing from sight,
that mother won’t succumb to something so
gentle as decay. Not ashes, not dust—
never was and won’t be, and neither will
mine; her blood is that cold.

Still, all my life

I have asked after her happiness
as if it were closer kin. I watch her
wrestle away from the grave the fallen
white rib of a sycamore. The smile meant
for me is cast, a shadow, past me. *Are you
happy?* I have asked her, asking her to lie.

JAMES APPLEWHITE

James Applewhite was born in 1935 in Stantonsburg, North Carolina. He is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Daytime and Starlight* (Louisiana State University Press, 1997). He lives in Northern Durham County next to the Eno River State Park with his high school sweetheart and wife of more than forty years, the former Janis Forrest.

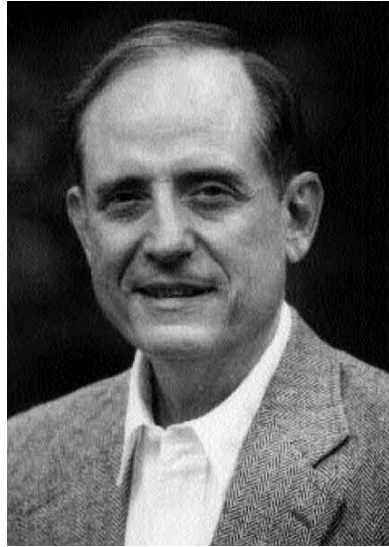


Photo Credit: Les Todd

My Grandfather's Funeral

I knew the dignity of the words:
"As for man, his days are as grass,
As a flower of the field so he flourisheth:
For the wind passeth, and he is gone" —
But I was not prepared for the beauty
Of the old people coming from the church,
Nor for the suddenness with which our slow
Procession came again in sight of the awakening
Land, as passing white houses, Negroes
In clothes the color of the earth they plowed,
We turned, to see bushes and rusting roofs
Flicker past one way, the stretch of fields
Plowed gray or green with rye flow constant
On the other, away to unchanging pines
Hovering over parallel boles like
Dreams of clouds.