Idolatry

To those who say there is a slippery slope
between the sacred & the profane, I wonder
what you’d make of the woman in church today,
& the church itself, rented by the pastor
in a low-down theater on a run-down street known
otherwise for the truck & trunk & nighttime sales
of anything for a good price so long as you’re willing
to pay cash only & not ask too many questions.
It is summer again. Hibiscus, hydrangea, the rose garden
uptown — hell, everything has exploded into bloom,
even in the alleys & the backstreets, & then,
if that weren’t enough, white people start coming to
church here, too. The pastor preaches on, has a plan,
gives lessons disguised as praise, uses words like
gentrification & autonomy & together & struggle, &
for anyone ignorant or not listening, reminds us
that the story of the tree of life only proves
that we can’t do it alone. Autonomy may be the dream.
But. Community — that collection of people stumbling
into one another with words & sometimes tenderness.
The summer is hardly ever dark; at night there remains
a kind of luminescence that comes from the awareness
of heat, of growth. It is the world that can be dark — lights
are ever dim in the theater; there are no windows, no
stained glass to let in cherubic slants of summertime. But
this woman, sitting in front of me, singing as with a new
voice, all electricity & shimmer, and yet still, the lightness
was definitely from her hands, held high as though closer
to reaching what she hoped to, surely heavy from all
the beads she wore — earthen, glass, hand-made, real. Colors
exploded as if they, too, were sky bound, constrained by only
the imagination. Later on, when I closed my eyes in prayer,
the jewels were there, a city of color, a world of pattern & chaos.
Sacred Geometry 2

Great Pyramid: Jazz Pianist, Gospel Choir, Orchestra

Night out. I hold
my breath like lovers
hold one another. Outside
it is moonlit, the skies all
city & show. Floodlight
of pattern, possibility.

Inside, there is a meeting.
It is a union much like
anything which begins
from nothing, which is
everything. Spiral of
disparate moving together.

The pianist, his feet
dancing on stage despite
the austere reserve of
the philharmonic. Gospel
choir in back, a rainbow
in black & white, beaming
moon of silk, dazzling
voices that hurt the soul
with pain & sweetness both.

Carolina Landscape in Two Parts

l'esclavage — a child holds chains
there is a reservoir
somewhere
not
here —
the cramped & fetid
waiting rooms of
history
*

in a field
notebook
she records
the cotton, not
free labor
high profits
low overhead
but the way
she saved her son
from the same
hell
with the rusted
meat cleaver late
on a sunday afternoon
Collective

“If art is our only resistance, what does that make us?”

– Adrienne Rich

House of people whose eyes do not meet.
White people. The reason I first joined
a black church. Black people.

My new family is used to accepting pain &
wearing it gently, & therefore they take me in,
put me on. Black is beautiful but I am too almost,
imperfectly shaped. A mismatch. Question
to my parents: how could you. Not following
the rule of law is who I am. Even when the law begs
questions it’s still there to be followed.
In the South, I wonder. Am I an eyesore.
My brown skin not white. My light skin not dark.

Simplest blueprints of displacement: I dream
of the ocean, become a cliché, buy ocean-scented
everything. Blue becomes me, blue becomes
the symbol for all that has lost me.
What is to be done? Do I stay or can I go.
Tired & redundant I am. That was them

not me. I am an island
girl without water in sight. The imagination creates
mirage after mirage. The painting is on the wall. Where
is all that’s yet to be written. Isolation begins
like death — the moment is almost
an instant. When did it all begin. More

than a question: what wrests beyond, where
is collective, is shared, is memory. Long ago
a boy of rage compelled by loss & love &
distance’s song slew his brother.
His punishment: banishment & more distance,
a long lifetime of wandering barren lands.
Dear Beyond

“Happy the eyes that can close.”
– Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*

Tell me if this is true: I want to know what survives us, what’s bequeathed from mother to daughter, what’s passed across oceans & migrations & border crossings of the soul & every imaginable landscape. Some nights I dream of cities rising brick by brick, cream colored & pink, flesh-like & built on enslaved sweat, fishermen cleaning silver kettles of pewter fish, their eyes slab gray & forced open by death, atrociously seeing & seeing & — men bent close to the earth, arms like scythes, mountains grizzled with pine trees, ash trees swiped down for love of money, starved boys, girls turned to ash, men & women made into soap, people loved & hated beyond reason, an ocean of memories — all mine even in their hideous imaginableness — which slosh against my skull. I wake to shadows I have been or will become: flutter of leaf to ground, birds returning, too early, to naked trees. Movement in the corner of everywhere. What is there unrepeatable, what cannot be handed down?

**The Lost Hours**

Even when I have dismissed them all — the barber, the trick on the corner, the man who shows up in my dreams. What is this night — the darkness, the moon, the streetlights giving way to the fog that encroaches like a beast. I run & I hear it all: the gun blast, jazz, the man kicking his woman in her ribs, a soft harp, until she falls to the street & pleads, a trumpet from someone’s bedroom window. I have kept the lost hours like my mother kept what she could — our hair, our teeth, the things we lost in our childhoods. No one ever told us that we might need to keep hold of so much that gives way to time: my mother’s memory, my father, holidays & birthdays & the words *I love you* & cakes & even the memory of these things. I have kept the lost hours, those days I lived in Africa, where the child slept on the street, the boy who followed me until we both got lost. Even my rapist, I keep him, it, the night — I could tell you what the darkness looked like & the sweet, sweet shape of the moon. The scent of plantains & hibiscus. I have kept the lost hours, trying to do what, I don’t know.
Elegy for Places I’ve Left

What gets remembered: the prodigal son, Joseph’s dream, loosened fist of the tree, magnolia blossoms strewn along the river bank, a white trail leading to its end. The slowing of the pulse at the Japanese garden, heart all twisted at first like bonsai, later soft & careless as koi floating in the pond. Late afternoon, sneaking in, the light slanting & certain, all glorious like the sweet hymning of a spiritual, the sound the ocean still makes in ears long after leaving the ocean. The taste of salt which also remains on the lips & skin, white like snow. Blue-black skies during a sluggish snow in the heart of chill, middle of night. The urge to open the mouth, let flakes catch on the tongue, shiver the eyelashes & nose.

The art of distance & of boundaries. The hard look of the moon some nights, & in winter’s frigid slow motion, the sly pleasure of staring back, equally hard, equally wistful.

Dangerous Love Poem

Wet bright moss under & over the stream. Against. The stream itself, cold, mountainous, dark like the mountains themselves. How from a distance they’d seemed more like hills, less cragged & risky. Rain from fog, its caress sharp, almost: cool on my warm cheek like an accidental slap.

The loosing of the hands, the body limber & bending to plunge rushing waters. Oh, the sound of water on rock, friction of two improbable bodies meeting, movement of, whisper-gurgle of one & one touching the other. The noise, a kind of music. Bodies together — the breaking open of one against itself or the other, the getting lost as to which is which. Lightness crafted within harshest landscape.

Green, mere life, surviving nearly everywhere. Water-beaded heaviness of ferns. The unfurling.
In Medias Res

-- for CP Maze, the Concrete Generation Slam Poets, Charlotte, NC

The world has put its hands all over us, & we have both learned to yield to this kind of intimacy. We’ve learned what to do with silence, with now & with gone & with prayer. But here our paths have crossed, our bodies dream-heated & our minds curious. Still, you stay. & come closer. You too have told me the world is topside down or outside in, that for us to sleep at all would be to close our eyes inside a bullet — cheek to cheek, in public anonymity — to feel the utter loneliness that comes from a reckless closeness, the after that follows abandonment of reason. Free spirits believe in providence, in chance, in the accidental beauty of rain at midnight, the yellow certainty of late afternoon. The air between us an idea, nothing but the rhythm of breath. Everything held this moment in place — I drew you in my mind as you are, hoping to recreate you here, now, without distractions of the ghosts inside us, the brokenness of the body. The sky is bright with dusk & I have been watching my shadow fold in on itself, without words, devolving into a deeper shade of darkness until it disappears. You asked why we write, what makes a poet. Here. I am showing you. This darkness is the body of our words: we write to understand we’re not alone in it — even though it is ours to do alone.
Description

THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL invites original entries of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry for the Linda Flowers Literary Award. Submissions should detail examinations of intimate, provocative, and inspiring portraiture of North Carolina, its people and cultures, bringing to light real men and women having to make their way in the face of change, loss, triumph, and disappointments.

While authors do not have to be North Carolinians, entries are expected to draw on particular North Carolina connections and/or memories. Above all, entries should celebrate excellence in the humanities and reflect the experience of people who, like Linda Flowers, not only identify with the state, but also explore the promises, the problems, the experiences, and the meanings of lives that have been shaped by North Carolina and its many cultures.

Guidelines

ENTRIES SHOULD BE original, unpublished works of up to 2000–2500 words, typed and double-spaced. Five copies of each submission are required with a cover letter (copies will not be returned). The author’s name should not appear on the submission. Only one entry per writer will be accepted.

You may wish to enclose a SASE postcard for the Humanities Council to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript and a SASE for notification of the award selection.

Send entries for the 2009 Linda Flowers Literary Award, postmarked by August 15, 2009, to the North Carolina Humanities Council, 122 N. Elm Street, Suite 601, Greensboro, NC, 27401. Questions may be directed to Executive Director Shelley Crisp at (366) 334-5383 or scrisp@nchumanities.org.

The winner of the Linda Flowers Literary Award receives a cash prize of $500 and a stipend towards a Writer’s Residency at the Weymouth Center for Arts and Humanities in Southern Pines, NC. While the author maintains copyright of the work, the winning entry is published in a Council publication with the understanding that the Council may publish or republish it at any time.
**Previous Recipients**

**KAREN GILCHRIST**  
(2001)  
**JOSEPH BATHANTI**  
(2002)  
**HEATHER ROSS MILLER**  
(2003)  
**BARBARA PRESNELL**  
(2004)  
**KERMIT TURNER**  
(2005)  
**KATHY WATTS**  
(2006)  
**SUSAN WEINBERG VOGEL**  
(2007)

**2008 Selection Committee**

This year’s distinguished Linda Flowers Literary Award selection committee included:

- Keith Flynn, Managing Editor of the *Asheville Poetry Review*
- Chris Gould, English professor and Director of Faculty Leadership at UNC Wilmington
- Miranda Monroe, a reading specialist for the Cumberland County School System, an adjunct instructor for Reading Education at Fayetteville State University, and a North Carolina Humanities Council board member
- Barbara Presnell, creative writing professor at UNC Charlotte and the 2004 Linda Flowers Literary Award recipient

The North Carolina Humanities Council was privileged to have Linda Flowers as one of its members from 1992 to 1998. During the years we shared with her, she taught us many things. Above all, Linda showed us what it means to live by one’s belief that “the humanistic apprehension is as necessary for living fully as anything else. Education in the humanities,” she wrote, “is equipment for living.”

*That my book about Eastern North Carolina might touch a chord with some people, and with several ready-made audiences—teachers, social workers, health personnel, civic organizations, book clubs, readers in general… I had not anticipated. What these groups are responding to in *Thowed Away*, I think, is its human dimension: the focus on real men and women having to make their way in the face of a changing, onrushing and typically uncaring world…. This humanistic apprehension, I tell my students, is as necessary for living fully as anything else they may ever hope to have…they must recognize and nurture it in themselves…to realize more fully the potential of the human spirit.*

~ Linda Flowers,  
letter to the North Carolina Humanities Council Membership Committee, July 1992