

LINDA
FLOWERS
LITERARY
AWARD
2010

Legacy

Traci Lazenby Elliot

MY COUSIN AND I must have been nine or ten, in those years when waitresses still mistook me for a boy or him for a girl or the two of us for siblings. We played separate, parallel games in the pasture below our Nanny's house. Now and then one of us would call out to the other or trot past, but mostly we played alone. He tossed a persimmon at me, half-heartedly or distractedly, and it splatted on the oak tree next to me. "Missed me," I called, and he turned as he ran and stuck out his tongue. The flesh of the persimmon, stringy and seedy, caught on the tree bark and clung, blood-orange-red, like a badge.

Dean moved behind a swell of hill, and I saw our mother's mother wipe away the steam from the kitchen window, her hand moving in circles. I half-waved back to her. The clear November sunlight threatened to cut you, mow you down, slice right through you. The snakes and bugs had gone to ground or died, and I stepped into the woods, down by the creek where the cattle watered. It seemed impossibly small there, like a fairy tale, and I knelt on moss as fine as hair and dipped my hands into the cool water. I rinsed my face and hands with it, under the branches of a tall cedar. I crawled underneath, into a sort of room, carpeted with dried cedar, and leaned my back against the trunk. The air felt dry and used-up in my nostrils and mouth, with the brittle texture of old newspapers.

I've tried and tried to get through to you, but it's hard, from this side, to get any kind of message to you, because my voice garbles and encrypts. One of the inconveniences of being dead is that you lose intention,

have lost the power of will. I watched in horror that afternoon, as you played near the stream, and I hoped you wouldn't hear, that you wouldn't look, or that you'd remember it only as a nightmare. A child shouldn't see such things, even necessary things, but somehow children will.

I looked downstream, past the persimmons, and something caught my eye. It hung in the oak, dead. It might have been an animal — do animals die in trees and then hang there? Maybe just a scrap of clothes. I felt suddenly hot, and my stomach clenched. I drew my legs under me and leaned forward, touched the ground with my fingertips, like a sprinter. I meant to run but didn't. Instead I leaned there, poised, and saw that man in the tree, a black man, his whole body up there, not just his clothes, and a kind of intuition crept into my bones, reptilian and unbidden. I knew that only I could see him, that even if anyone else looked, I wouldn't be able to point him out.

One of the ways you could hurt yourself would be to go and stand, now, at the base of that hill, where you remember seeing your grandmother, canning her green beans and wiping her window, and where you remember the creek and the stand of trees. You could stand near where the cedar was, and the bright persimmon, and you could look for the oak. Now you would find just saplings bought at Lowe's Hardware and landscaped in, their trunks taped and staked, standing in fescue, a sprinkler tick-tick-ticking past. If you stood there, you'd look for fresh water and find a storm drain, look for pasture and find quarter-acre rectangles, a 1500 square-foot two-story at the center of each.



In just such a way, I stood while you crouched under that cedar tree, and saw that time had changed the world, the three-hundred-acre plantation reduced to a fifty-acre farm with a Depression-era clapboard and a cattle barn behind.

Oaks hold their leaves longest, in the fall, and a few brown leaves still clung to this one, like brush strokes, a few on this limb, a few more on that one. The man would sway from the oak even when its last leaf fell, even when the new leaves pushed out next spring. He had already been there so long, might always be there. He wore a blue shirt, and the limpid sky behind him complemented it, as if an artist had arranged his wardrobe. The sun shone and a breeze moved the flayed shirt, a perfect day, but still he hung there, his feet bare and bloody. I don't know how far up he was; his feet swung at least the height of a man from the ground. I couldn't look away.

I want you to know that I wasn't thinking of it as murder at the time. When I was there, part of it, I thought we were doing what had to be done.

He was there, his tongue swollen, dry, protruding. The next instant, only a rag of his shirt remained, caught on the branch. Over and over I re-membered him, putting him together and taking him apart, appearing and disappearing him. Even now, I rub the memory of him like a pebble in my pocket, like my tongue to the socket of a pulled tooth.

When I surrender to this memory, I top the ridge behind Nanny's house, the grass tall and dry-grey, gone far, far to seed. Dean and I hunt for turkeys. My shotgun is an old poplar branch, with a fork in it braced against my shoulder and my finger on a twig nub. An abandoned school bus sags between cinder blocks, its windows open or broken, gaping,

the paint faded but still yellow. We were only kids, and there were no wild turkeys to be shot with our wooden guns in 1970s Charlotte. Surely there was no bus, but still the memory climbs my spine, genuine as a serpent.

We hunted him. The image you saw — I'm sorry, child, I shouldn't have let you go to that place, see those things — was not of us turkey hunting. You don't hunt for turkeys from horseback. You hunt for men from horseback. It lifts you up, so that you can see someone crouching in the tall grass or lying behind a log. It lifts you up so that, when you find him, he knows that you are his superior.

We found him in just that way, at the top of the ridge, near where you remember the pines. There were none there in my time, and there are none there now. He had hidden in a low spot, hardly a hiding place at all, with nothing concealing him but



grass and a short outcrop of rock. He stepped out, broad through the chest and strong, as if he had some right to be there, as if he were entitled. He stepped out as if he had been waiting for us.

I smell horse sweat and human terror. I observe that I could stop, if I wanted. I could wake myself from this, but that would not erase it. My desire, my fear, is immaterial.

We beat him before we took him back down the hill to hang him. Not in anger, mind you, which makes it somehow worse. If you do something repellent out of anger, even the law recognizes that your actions aren't entirely under your control. We were not angry, and still the law would not have found in us any crime or wrong-doing. We beat him with a sense of duty, the way you might meet with your banker and then mark it off your agenda. It wasn't something I looked forward to doing; it wasn't something I hated, either.

We beat his back until his shirt hung in strips, and then until his flesh tore, as well. We beat the soles of his feet because he had used them to run. Think of that for a moment. The arch of your foot is as sensitive as the palm of your hand, even if you're accustomed to going barefoot. He had been beaten before, and he was a strong man, but he screamed when we beat his feet, when the tiny bones crushed and broke and the skin began to bleed and swell.

Giddy terror whispers that neither a dream nor a fiction happened, that time folds and warps, laps and overlaps, that I see a reality. Out of my own darkness comes assurance that it all nestles in memory, not imagination. That the land itself holds it all, the tree and the stream and the rock where he hid, that those things vouchsafe his shirt and his feet. That I, myself, hold it all.

We threw him over my saddle, and my horse carried him down to the stand of trees where you played that day. In my time, it was a full forest,

and we did our grim work at its edge. Now it lies buried under asphalt and fescue, cement and boxwoods, as if to nullify the past.

I would like to tell you that he did not know what was happening when we sat him up on my horse and put the rope around his neck, but even beaten, even barely conscious, he knew. He begged, and the women who had come, some of them his wife and daughters, I suppose, they begged for his life, too. I would also like to tell you that I tied the rope to the tree tightly out of mercy, and that I wanted to be certain it was over quickly for him. The truth is more matter-of-fact. I wanted it to be over because I had other business that afternoon, and would have to change my collar and go into town.

I splashed water on my face again, and washed my hands, and then I left the woods. I ran across the pasture and up the hill, to the house, to find my cousin, my grandmother, safety. If I did anything at all with what I saw, I wrote it off as one more imaginary venture, one more piece of evidence that I inhabited a reality separate from everyone else's reality. One more piece of evidence, in other words, that left untethered, I might wander to places I didn't want to go.

I remember the pond, further up the driveway, and how deeply dangerous it seemed, full of water moccasins, with sharp-nosed foxes stalking through the cattails. I remember mistletoe growing in the tops of the trees, up near the road, and my mother shooting sprigs of it down with a pistol at Christmas time. I remember thistles and daisies in the empty fields, sad-eyed cows in the pastures. I remember the smell of coffee steaming in brown Hull mugs, beige rims dripping down over brown bases. I remember the steamy kitchen and the table covered in jars of green

beans, vegetable soup, and pickled okra, all of them bright as jewels.

Sometimes, here on this side, I scream and scream, and this is why. I heard that man beg, and I heard the whip strike him, and I heard his children beg. I whipped my horse from under him. These things I did, and I can't reverse them, can't redeem them, must watch as they visit even you, the sixth generation, even your sons, who will be the seventh. I offered him no mercy. I accepted all of it as normal, as outside my concern. Hatred spilled and ran and pooled, and then seeped into the ground, like that man's blood. We, the bodiless, cannot change, cannot erase, cannot absorb it. Jesus himself won't change any of it without the hands — and the feet, Lord, the feet, too — the hands and feet of you who have flesh. You hold my redemption with your own.

My Nanny died in 1996. Dean and I have mortgages, lives, two children each. Where, now, is that man, with his bloody feet? What am I to do with him? The pond, the stream, the trees are gone, and the land lay buried by progress. Can I accept the cruel secret, carry it further, coiled at my navel, into the future? Or is there restitution to be made, redemption to be had? Can I take him down, now, and bathe and bandage and heal those feet? Can he be revived and returned to his family, freed again into that first generation into Canaan? If I confess this now, does it heal any of us? If I am a witness, removed only by time, can I cut the rope?

Unpave it and dig beneath, until you find the oak tree with its orange-red badge, and pull it out by the roots, even if it takes forever, generations of us strung together, past into future, toiling. Beg as we beg, here, for forgiveness, until guilt and forgiveness and mercy bind all of us together, bind the wounds that you inherit.

TRACI LAZENBY ELLIOT

TRACI LAZENBY ELLIOT grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, and graduated from Washington and Lee University. Her work has appeared in *More Lights than One*, a volume of scholarly criticism of Fred Chappell's prose, and her poetry in *Lifting Women's Voices*, a book of prayers. "Legacy" is her first published work of fiction. Elliot, who lives in Asheboro, is the Director of Christian Formation at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd.



Photo by Mendi Lowe.

I BEGAN "LEGACY" three years ago and returned to it from time to time, to turn it upside down and shake it. I'd begun to think nothing was ever going to come out of it. I changed the point of view, shifted the narrative structure, wrote it as a poem, considered that it might be a part of something else and considered that it might not become anything at all. I set it aside and hoped it would lead me to its own ending, and finally it did.

There's an analogy between what we do to the land — carve it into uniform rectangles, pave over it, prune it into

submission — and what we do to ourselves when we acknowledge only the bright, sparkling, powerful aspects of ourselves (or our ancestors) and ignore the cruelty and callousness of which we're capable for the easy and convenient.

Part of defining ourselves includes defining our ancestors, I think, perhaps particularly here in the South. The truth of it is that we live with a heritage that includes hate and shame. Paving over that, disguising it with untruths because the truth makes us squirm, leaves us with an inauthentic landscape that can't heal or feed us. When we pretend that our ancestors were somehow different from what they were, we deny their reality. We can't afford to do that, because it denies our own reality, too.

Of Guilt and Forgiveness

Barbara Presnell

BARBARA PRESNELL, poet, prose writer, lyricist, grew up in Asheboro, North Carolina. She is the author of four books of poetry: *Snake Dreams*, winner of the Zoë Kincaid Brockman Award for best book from the North Carolina Poetry Society; *Unravelings*, recipient of the Longleaf Press Award and the Oscar Arnold Young Award for best book from the North Carolina Poetry Society; *Los Hijos*, set in Galeana, Nuevo Leon, Mexico; and *Piece Work*, a suite of prose poems adapted for stage by the Touring Theatre of North Carolina. *Piece Work* won the Cleveland State University Poetry Center First Book Prize. Since 2000 Presnell has taught writing at the UNC Charlotte. As the 2004 Linda Flowers Literary Awardee, she presented the honor to Traci Lazenby Elliot at the 2010 Caldwell celebration.

I AM PLEASED AND HONORED

to be asked to present the Linda Flowers Literary Award to this year's recipient, Traci Lazenby Elliot, for "Legacy." Legacy is an appropriate title for the story and an appropriate word for an evening that pays tribute to Fred Chappell, whose legacy fills this room and stretches across this state. But it's the legacy of Linda Flowers that I want to address — what it means to be honored with this award in her name.

Those who knew Linda have never forgotten her spirit, her courage, and her devotion to the underserved and under-noticed people of this state. I never knew Linda. In fact, I'd never heard of Linda Flowers until I won the award a few years back. I didn't know what I was in for then, but I realized quickly that being a Linda Flowers Literary Award winner must be a lot like being a beauty queen.

In the year that follows the award, you get a lot of attention. You're invited to a lot of places, like Winston-Salem, Chapel Hill, Asheville, Fountain, and Faison. You'll get asked over and over, in the most unlikely places — like the grocery store, the post office, the library, church — if you knew Linda Flowers, and when you say, no, you never did, you'll hear a story about her, almost always about what a presence she was and how passionately

she believed in the people of North Carolina.

When your year is up, you'll go back to your old life, but you'll never be the same, because you have been infused with the spirit of Linda — her desire to tell the stories of those whose stories don't get told, to give voice to those whose voices don't get heard. The Linda Flowers Literary Award reminds us to do what Linda did, to look closely at ourselves as North Carolinians, at who we were, who we are, and who we can be.

Tonight's prizewinning story, "Legacy," by Traci Lazenby Elliot, is one Linda, I believe, would heartily applaud. It's a beautifully crafted, hauntingly painful story of the legacy of land and loss of land. It's the story of family then and family now. It's a legacy of guilt for actions taken and decisions made in ignorance that will stay a part of who we are for generations and perhaps forever. It's

a plea for forgiveness and an aching desire for peace. It's a powerful story of change and the inability to change. It's a story of us, as North Carolinians and as Southerners.



Photo by Read Creations.

Linda Flowers Literary Award

THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL invites original, unpublished entries of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry for the 2011 Linda Flowers Literary Award. Submissions should celebrate excellence in the humanities and reflect the experiences of people who, like Linda Flowers, not only identify with North Carolina, its people and cultures, but also explore its problems and promises.

For complete submission guidelines and prize details, see the North Carolina Humanities website at www.nchumanities.org. Questions may be directed to executive director Shelley Crisp at (366) 334-5383 or scrisp@nchumanities.org.

DEADLINE: postmark date August 15, 2011.

The North Carolina Humanities Council was privileged to have Linda Flowers as one of its members from 1992 to 1998.

*That my book about Eastern North Carolina might touch a chord with some people...I had not anticipated. What [they] are responding to in *Thrown 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.*

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

2010 Selection Committee

MICHAEL CHITWOOD, department of English, UNC Chapel Hill

LINDA OXENDINE, professor emeritus UNC Pembroke, former director and curator of the American Resource Center, North Carolina Humanities Council trustee

BRIAN RAILSBACK, department of English and dean of the Honors College, Western Carolina University

SHARON RAYNOR, Johnson C. Smith Mott University Professor, department of English, Johnson C. Smith University



PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS

Karen Gilchrist "The Cure"	2001
Joseph Bathanti "Land of Amnesia"	2002
Heather Ross Miller "Miss Jessie Dukes and Kid Heavy"	2003
Barbara Presnell "Sherry's Prayer: NC Textiles 1967-2004"	2004
Kermit Turner "Tongue-Tied"	2005
Kathy Watts "Goin' Fishin'"	2006
Susan Weinberg Vogel "The Pick-up Line"	2007
Kristin Hemmy "Carolina Landscapes: Poems"	2008
Katey Schultz "Amplitude"	2009
Traci Lazenby Elliot "Legacy"	2010